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BATTLE FOR THE STARS

by Alexander Blade





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The Editorial

AS announced last issue, Bob Bloch takes over as reviewer in FANDORA'S BOX this month. Bob needs no introduction to science fiction readers, having graced the pages of practically every magazine in the field for quite a span of years. In addition to his status as a top writer in the business, Bob has the unique distinction of being the only "pro" we know who is also a top "fan" in the active sense of being a fan. We have seldom been able to pick up a fan magazine (and there are dozens) which does not contain a letter, article, or other bit of satiric prose from Bob's prolific pen. We sometimes wonder where the guy finds time to do all this writing! At any rate, we welcome the sage of Weyauwega, into *Madge* as a regular contributor. We predict the BOX will take on a new personality from now on. One thing's sure—we'll have a lot of fun!

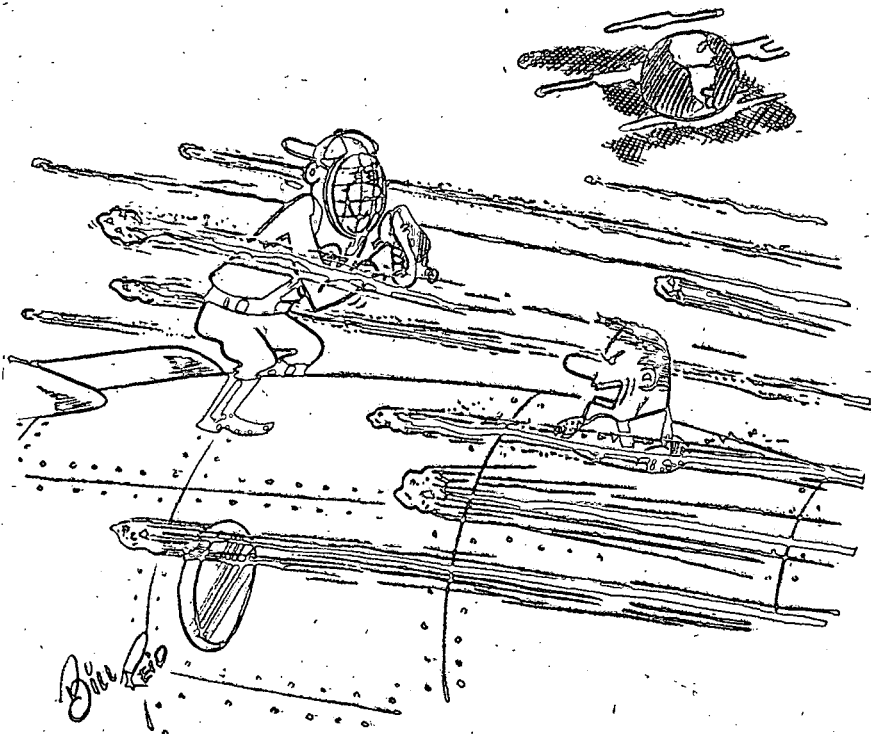
WITH the welcoming mood in mind we stretch out the mat for Alexander Blade, who wrote the lead novel this month. You've seen Alex's byline on many a fine novel in past years—not to mention numerous short stories—but this is his first feature yarn in quite a while. We have a hunch you'll be hollering for more—and if you holler loud enough we might, mind you, coax another novel out of the lad.

WE bet you took more than a casual look at the cover this issue. We were astonished to find—when one of the local fans mentioned it—that this painting by Malcolm Smith is the first full interplanetary cover we've run in several years. If you've got an up-to-date back issue file go and check. At any rate, this is a shocking state of affairs for a top science fiction magazine, so we promise you right now we'll have Smith and a few of our other artists work on other interplanetary themes for future issues. Speaking of Smith, we've always felt he is without question the best "space ship" artist in the field. And his cover this issue helps to prove it. Incidentally, for those of you who are sticklers for cover and lead story accuracy, we think you'll find Malcolm's scene sticks pretty close to the way Blade wrote it. A nice job all around and we're right proud of both boys.

WE had a surprise visitor the other evening. Willy Ley was in town on a lecture tour and stopped by to have a few drinks and give us the latest news on the flying saucers. Actually, Willy had no real news to offer—other than the fact that wherever he lectures somebody is sure to request that he speak on the phenomenon. We consider this "news" since Willy is one of the world's best-known rocket authorities,

and you'd think people would be more interested in hearing "facts" rather than "fiction". Naturally, we're glad they prefer the latter—although our own personal view is that the saucers are *not* fiction. Our apologies, Willy!—We would like to add, however, that Willy Ley maintains an open mind on the subject. He's willing to be shown proof—like everyone else. Perhaps one day soon one of the elusive craft (or illusions) will land. All we hope is that we're around for the occasion!

IF you've been following our **SCIENTIFILM MARQUEE** in our companion magazine, **IMAGINATIVE TALES**, you'll have noted the announcement of Hollywood activity with a raft of new science fiction movies; we noted in the paper today that three new stf films were opening in Chicago. Guess the stf boom is on! Now all we have to do is find time to see the films. Hope we're not disappointed. If they have action and adventure we won't be. Just as you won't be in reading the stories this issue. with

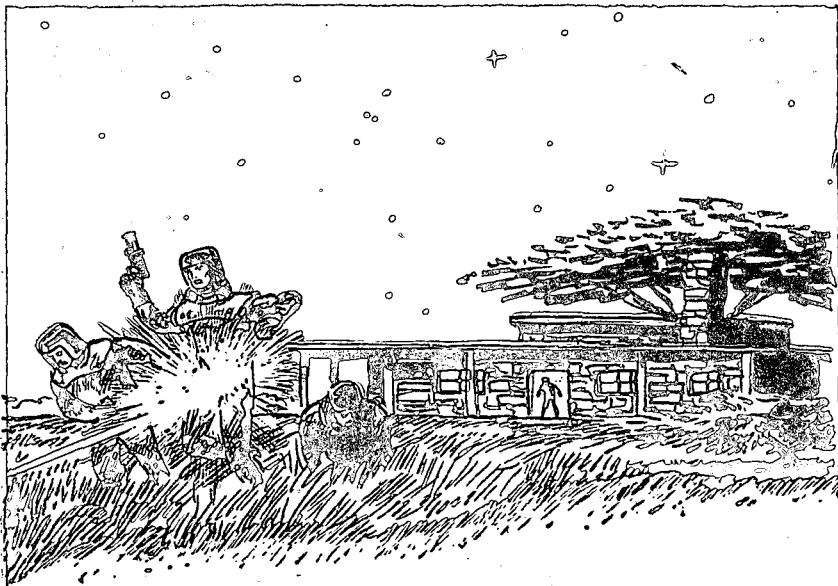


"Look, Herb, this isn't a joking matter!"

BATTLE for the STARS

by ALEXANDER BLADE





Kirk had never seen the distant planet called Earth, yet his squadron was now ordered there — to stem the outbreak of a galactic war!

IT WAS well called the Dragon's Throat, thought Kirk. Throat of fire, of burning suns, a cosmic blind-alley into danger!

You made your decision. You threw a ship, a hundred men, your officers, your friends, your own Commander's badge you threw them all down on the gamble. But when the stakes were stars

He said to himself. "The hell with it, we're committed."

He said aloud, "Radar?"

Joe Garstang, standing on the bridge beside him, answered without turning. "Nothing has been monitored yet. Not yet."

Kirk's palms itched. If they were running into an ambush, if Orion heavy cruisers were waiting for them, they'd soon know it. There could be ships all around them. Radar wasn't too dependable, in the howling vortices of force-field

energy flung out around this jungle of stars.

Through the broad bridge-windows—the “windows” that were really scanners cunningly translating faster-than-light probe rays into visual images—there beat upon his face the light of a thousand suns.

It was Cluster N-356-44, in the Standard Atlas. It was also hellfire made manifest, to starmen. It was a hive of swarming suns, pale green and violet, white and yellow-gold and smoky red, blazing so fiercely that the eye was robbed of perspective and these stars seemed to crowd and jostle and rub each other. Up against the black backdrop of the firmament they burned, pouring forth the torrents of their life-energy to whirl in terrific cosmic maelstroms. The merchant ships that boldly drove the great darks between ordinary star-worlds would recoil aghast from the navigational perils here. Only a fool—or a cruiser—would go in here.

There was a narrow cleft between cliffs of stars, with the flame-shot glow of an immense nebula roofing it. The only possible way into the heart of the cluster, this Dragon's Throat of starman legend. But others had gone in this way. At least, so said the rumors,

rumors that had reached the squadron as far away as the Pleiades. Rumors too factual, too alarming, to be ignored.

Rumors of cruisers from the squadrons of Orion Sector, that had gone into this cluster. Rumors of a secret base, on a hidden world. The ships of Orion Sector had no business here. Neither, for that matter, did the ships of Kirk's own Lyra Sector. This cluster was no-man's land, part of the buffer zones that were supposed to reduce friction between the five great Sectors of the galaxy. Actually, these stellar wildernesses were the scenes of constant, nameless little wars.

The five governors of the five great Sectors were, all of them, ambitious men. Solleremos of Orion, Vorn of Cepheus, Gianea of Leo, Strowe of Perseus, Ferdias of Lyra—they watched each other jealously. Five great barons of the galaxy, paying only a lip-service allegiance to the shadowy Central Council far away on a half-forgotten world called Earth, in reality independent satraps of the stars, hungry for space, hungry for power. Yes, even Ferdias, thought Kirk. Ferdias was the man he served, respected, and even loved in a craggy sort of way. But Ferdias, like the others, played a mas-

sive game of chess with men and suns, moving his squadrons here and his undercover operatives there, laboring ceaselessly to hold on to what he had and perhaps enlarge his domain, just a little, a solar system here and a minor cluster there

And the game went on. Right now, Kirk thought he was probably heading into a trap. But if Orion cruisers *were* in here, he had to know it. A hostile base here, if left to grow, could dominate all the star-lanes from Capella to Arcturus. It was up to him as a squadron-commander, to go in and find out.

Kirk looked at the looming, overtopping cliffs of stars that went up to the glowing nebula above and down to the black pit of absolutely nothing below.

He thought of Lyllin, waiting for him back at Vega. A starman had no business with a wife.

He said again, "Radar?"

"Still nothing," said Garstang. His square face was no less grim than Kirk's. He was captain of this flagship *Starson*, and what happened to her was important to him. "If there is a base here," he said, "we should have come in with the whole squadron."

KIRK SHOOK his head. He had made his decision and he

was not going to start doubting it now, no matter how lonely and exposed he felt.

"That could be exactly what Solleremos wants. With the right kind of ambush, a whole squadron could be clobbered in this mess. Then Lyra would be wide open. No. One ship is enough to risk."

"Yes, sir," said Garstang.

"The hell with you, Joe," said Kirk. "Say what you're thinking."

"I am thinking that the rumor mentioned cruisers, plural, indefinite. We'd better catch them while they're all asleep."

The *Starson* forged her way onward toward the two red suns at the end of the Dragon's Throat. And Kirk thought that if he had made the wrong decision, if the *Starson* never came back again, Ferdias would be very angry. But that would not then make any difference to him.

Looking up at the flaring, tumbling waves of the nebula, like the underside of a burning ocean, Kirk said to Garstang:

"Does it seem to you the pace is speeding up? I mean, this jockeying for power between the Sectors has gone on a long time, ever since Earth lost real authority. But it seems different lately, somehow. More incidents, more feeling of something driving ahead

toward a definite goal, a plan and a pattern you can't quite see. You know what I mean?"

Garstang nodded "I know."

The computer banks clicked and chattered. Relays kicked, compensating power, compensating course, compensating tides of gravitic force quite capable of breaking a ship apart like a piece of flawed glass. The two red binaries gave them a final glare of malice and were gone. They were clear of the Throat.

A star the color of a peacock's breast lay dead ahead.

"Ready for approach," said Garstang.

"Stand by," said Kirk. "We'll wait until the last possible minute to shift. If they haven't picked us up already, maybe they won't."

Garstang gave his orders. Kirk watched the blaze of peacock-blue grow swiftly. No ambush in the Throat, so now what? Ambush on the world of the blue star? Or nothing? A wild-goose chase, time and money wasted? Or maybe Solleremos had planted those rumors to draw Kirk's attention while a strike was made somewhere else.

Suddenly Kirk felt very old and very tired. He had been in the squadron for twenty years, ever since he was sixteen, and in all these twenty years the great game

of stars, the strain, the worry, had never let up.

It must have been nice in a way, Kirk thought, in the old days a couple of centuries ago when Earth still governed in fact, and all the star-squadrons were part of the Galactic Navy, and the great battle was with the galaxy itself and not with one another.

"We're getting close," said Garstang.

Kirk shook himself and got down to business. There followed a few minutes of split-second activity, and then the *Starson* had shuddered out of overdrive and was plunging toward a bright world almost dangerously close to her. There was still no sign of any enemy, and the communicators remained silent.

AN HOUR later by ship's chronometer they had located the one port of entry listed for the planet and they had set the *Starson* down in the middle of a large piece of natural desert that served well enough for what space traffic ever came here.

It was night on this side of the planet. There was no moon, but on a cluster world a moon is a useless luxury. The sky blazes with a million stars, so that day is replaced not by darkness but by the light

of another sort, soft and many-colored, full of strange glimmers and flitting shadows. In this eery star-glow a town was visible about a mile away. Otherwise there was nothing. No ships. . No legions of Orion Sector.

"The ships could be hidden somewhere," Garstang said. "Maybe halfway around the planet, but waiting to jump us as soon as they get word."

Kirk admitted that was possible. He put on his best dress uniform of blue-and-silver, and strapped a portable communicator between his shoulders. It rather spoiled the effect, but there was no help for that. Garstang watched him.

"How many men will you want?" he asked.

"None. I'm going in alone."

Garstang's eyes widened. "I won't come right out and say you're crazy."

"I was here once before," said Kirk. "When old Volland was commander and I was an ensign. These people are poor but proud. They have traditions of long-ago splendor, claim their kings ruled the whole cluster and so on. They dislike strangers, and won't let many in."

"But if Sollereimos' men are already here- - -"

"That's the reason for the porto." Kirk frowned, trying to plan ahead. "Exactly twenty-minutes after I enter the town I'll contact you, and I'll continue to do so at twenty minute intervals. If I'm so much as a minute late, take off and buzz hell out of the place. It'll give me a bargaining point, anyway."

Garstang said dourly, "A lot can happen in twenty minutes. Suppose you're not able to bargain?"

"Then you're on your own."

In the airlock, open now and filled with a dry, stinging wind, Kirk paused, looking toward the distant town, a lonely blot of darkness between the star-blazing sky and the gleaming sand. Here and there in it lights burned, but they were few and somehow not welcoming.

"She's all yours," he said to Garstang. "If anything looks wrong to you, don't wait for me. Take her away."

"Yes, sir," said Garstang.

Kirk smiled. He climbed down into the sand and began to walk.

The town took shape as he approached it. The stone-built houses, mostly round or octagonal, were scattered out with no particular plan. Under the red and gold and diamond-colored stars that burned above them as bright as moons,

they looked curiously, remote and evil, like old wizards in peaked hats, peering with little winking eyes. The dry wind blew, laden with alien scents. Apart from the wind there was no sound.

THREE MEN met him at the edge of the town. They wore pale cloaks and carried long staffs tipped with horn. They were all of seven feet tall. They wore their hair high on their heads to accentuate this height, and they were slender and graceful as reeds, walking along with a light dancing step as though the wind blew them. But their faces in the star-glow were smooth and secret, their eyes as expressionless as bits of shiny glass.

"What does the man from outside desire?" asked one of them, in the universal speech.

Kirk said, "He desires to speak with those others from outside who enjoy your hospitality."

But they were not going to make it that easy for him. Their faces remained impassive, and the one who had just spoken said coolly, "Our lord has wisdom in all matters. Perhaps he will understand your words. I do not."

They fell in around Kirk and moved with him into the wide sandy space that went between

the wandering houses. The nerves tightened up in Kirk's belly, and his back felt cold. He looked at his wrist chrono, carefully. There was no sound but the whispering of sand under their feet. Garstang would be watching with the 'scope, but once he was in among the houses he could no longer be seen.

That was almost at once. The tall men walked on with their light swaying stride, so that he had to move at an undignified trot to keep up. The stone houses with their high roofs closed in behind him. This dark and brooding town ill accorded with old tales of cluster-kings, he thought. Yet the past held many things.

When they were close to the center of the town, the leader stopped beside a round structure from whose open door came light.

"Will the man from outside enter the dwelling of our lord?"

Kirk breathed a little easier as he went through the door. Apparently there was no truth to the rumors that . . .

A chopping blow took him on the back of the head. He fell forward. He was stunned but not unconscious, and he tried to roll over, thrashing out blindly with his fists and feet. But at once there were men on top of him, heavy solid men grinding his face into

the gritty carpet, pounding the wind out of him, holding him down.

In a minute his hands were tied tight behind him and his ankles lashed together. They cut the straps of the porto and pulled it off him. Then, like a sack of meal, he was dragged to the wall and propped upright.

In an absolute fury of rage, he spat blood out of his mouth and looked up dizzily into the light.

There were three or four men here, obviously not natives of this planet, but he did not pay much attention to them. The one he looked at stood apart, directly in front of Kirk, a lean dark iron-faced man with very alert eyes, and the easy, dangerous manner of one who enjoys his work because he is so admirably well fitted for it, as a cat enjoys hunting.

He said to Kirk, "My name is Tauncer."

Kirk nodded. He looked with feral interest at this most famous of Solleremos' agents. "I should be flattered, shouldn't I?"

Tauncer shrugged. "We all do what we can, Commander. Each in his own way."

"Well," said Kirk. "What do you want?"

"The answer to one simple question."

His face came closer to Kirk's, very tense, very keen, searching for any sign of evasion.

He asked his question.

"What is Ferdias planning to do about Earth?"

CHAPTER II

THERE WAS a long moment of complete silence, during which Kirk stared wide-eyed at Tauncer, and Tauncer probed him with a gaze like a scalpel.

On Kirk's part, it was a silence of sheer astonishment. No question could have taken him so unexpectedly. He'd been prepared to be grilled on squadron dispositions, forces in being, bases, all the things that the men of Orion Sector would like to know about Lyra. But this—

It didn't make sense. Earth was not part of the present-day star struggle. That old planet, so far back in the galaxy that Kirk had never been within parsecs of it—it was history, nothing more. It had had its day, its sons long ago had spread out to the stars and their blood ran in the veins of men on many worlds, in Kirk himself. But its great day had long been done, and the Sector governors who played the cosmic chess-game for suns paid it no heed at all.

"I'll repeat," said Tauncer softly. "What's Ferdiás planning to do about Earth?"

"I haven't," said Kirk, "the faintest idea what you're talking about."

Tauncer sighed. "Possibly." He straightened up. "Even probably. But I've been sent here to make the inquiry, and I'll need more than your word and an expression of innocence. Brix!"

One of the other men came forward. Tauncer spoke to him in a low voice, and he nodded, and went into the shadows across the room. Kirk's heart pounded in alarm. He tried to get up, but he had been too well bound. He could not see his chrono, but he did not think that more than seven or eight minutes had elapsed since he had entered the town. Plenty of time for mischief. He said to Tauncer,

"I didn't walk into this with my eyes completely shut. My men have instructions."

"I'm sure they have. And don't feel too badly about this, Commander. The details of the trap were based on a minute study of your psychology and past record. It would have been almost impossible for you to avoid falling into it. Can't you hurry that up, Brix?"

"All ready." Brix came back carrying a light tripod with a projec-

tor mounted on it. And now Kirk's heart sank coldly into the pit of his stomach. He had seen that particular type of projector before. It was called a vera-ray, and it beamed electric impulses in a carefully-controlled range that absolutely stunned and demoralized a man's brain, making him temporarily incapable of lying or resisting questioning.

Kirk had no information about Earth to give away. But there were plenty of other things in his mind, things of military importance to Lyra Sector that Solleremos would be only too glad to get hold of.

How long now? Ten minutes more? Too long. Even five minutes would be too long, with that projector pounding his skull.

He couldn't get up, but he could roll. He rolled, acting on a split-second reflex that caught even Tauncer by surprise. The projector was only four or five feet away. Brix and the other men were on top of him again almost at once but not quite in time. He fetched the tripod a thrashing kick, with both his feet bound together. It fell over. He could not hope that it was broken, not on this soft carpeted floor, but it would take them time to set it up again.

He tried to keep them busy as long as he could, but Tauncer un-

derstood perfectly well what he was up to. He pulled his men off and set Brix to adjusting the projector again, and turned to Kirk.

"You may as well spare yourself, Commander. I have my mission, and the military have theirs. There are three cruisers standing off and on, just out of radar range—they got word the moment you landed, and they're already on their way."

He smiled briefly. "The price you pay for fame, Commander. The Fifth is Ferdias' elite squadron, and nobody gets command of it unless he's in Ferdias' special favor."

"Friendship is one thing," said Kirk hotly, "and favor is another. I don't like your choice of words."

HE WAS just talking, words, sounds with no meaning. Inside he was thinking of Garstang and the *Starsong*, and all the lives of all the men in her. He had led them here.

He looked at Tauncer, and he began now to hate him, with a hate as deep and cold as space.

"Ferdias will tear your heart out," he said.

"Perhaps," said Tauncer. "But he may have other things to occupy his mind."

"Earth? He's never been there. None of us have. It's only a name,

and a half-forgotten one at that. Why should Earth occupy his mind? Why, Tauncer?"

How long is twenty minutes? How long does it take three cruisers to come from Point X beyond radar range to Target Zero? How long does it take a man to realize he's through at last?

Brix said again, "All ready."

Tauncer nodded.

Brix touched a stud on the projector.

As though that touch had done it, a dull and mighty roaring echoed from the desert—the full-throated cry of a heavy cruiser taking off.

The men looked, startled, toward the door. Desperately, Kirk rolled sideways, out of the force that was already battering at the edges of his mind.

"You out there!" he shouted at the doorway. "The men from outside avenge treachery! Call your lord—"

One of Tauncer's men kicked him alongside the jaw. Kirk shut up, hanging with blind determination to his consciousness. Forethought had provided this one chance. He would not get another. He did not dare to miss it.

The cruiser came low over the town. Dust sifted out of the cracks of the stone walls. The men fell to their knees, covering their

heads with their arms. The floor rocked under them, beaten by the rolling hammers of concussion.

The ripped sky closed upon itself with a stunning, thundering crash. After a minute or two the noise and the shock wave ebbed away.

Silence.

The men began to get up again. But Kirk did not move.

The cruiser came back. This time it was even lower. Garstang must have tickled her belly on the peaked roofs. Christ, thought Kirk, he's overdoing it. This time the stones were shaking loose. When it was over, a long thin shape came in through the doorway. It was the leader of the tall men who had brought Kirk here.

His face was a mask of fear and rage as he spoke to Tauncer. "You said that if we helped you, you would keep all other outsiders away!"

"We will," said Tauncer. "Listen—"

"Yes, listen," mocked Kirk. "Listen to it coming back. It'll keep coming back, unless I walk out of here—until your town is flattened."

The tall man stood hesitating. Then the *Starsong* roared back over. When it was gone, he picked himself up and with a knife cut the cords around Kirk's wrists and

ankles.

"Oh, no," said Tauncer, starting forward. "You can't—"

The tall man turned on him a face livid with frustrated anger. "Shall the children of cluster kings be destroyed to serve *you*? Shall I call my people in?"

Kirk, scrambling to his feet, saw outside the door the crowd of tall, pale-cloaked men who had gathered. Tauncer saw them too, and stopped.

As Kirk picked up the porto and started for the door, the man Brix cried violently, "Are we just going to stand here?"

Tauncer said levelly, "Why, yes, there are times when you do just that. But I think we'll see the Commander again."

KIRK WENT out through the door and through the crowd outside it. No one followed him. He got the porto working and talked fast to Garstang, then dropped the porto and sprinted out of the town toward the desert.

The cruiser dropped down ahead of him, as black and big against the stars as a falling world. The lock yawned open, and Garstang was inside it to meet him. He started to ask what had happened, but Kirk pushed him bodily away down the corridor, heading for the bridge.

"Get in there and do your stuff, Joe. We've got three Orion cruisers on our tail, as of the time we landed."

At that moment they heard the voice of the radarman crying out in sudden anguish, "Sir!"

Garstang said in mild reproof, "You ought to give a man more time, Commander. Radar, what's the bearing? All right, stand by—"

Orders crackled over the intercoms. Men moved swiftly at the control-banks. The last thing Kirk heard before the howling roar of take-off drowned everything was Garstang complaining that this sort of thing was hard on a ship. Then there was a dull crash from somewhere outside. The *Starsong* was shaken as though by a great wind. Both Kirk and Garstang had weathered enough fire to know that she had taken no hurt. But the Orion cruisers were in range now, bearing down on them in normal space at planetary speeds. The next shell would likely be a good deal closer. They dared not wait for star-room to go into overdrive.

"Hit it!" yelled Kirk. Garstang threw the relays open. Sirens shrilled and the lights went dim. The *Starsong* shuddered vertiginously.

And then they were in overdrive and racing out toward the twin red suns that guarded the

entrance to the Dragon's Throat.

The scanners and ultra-speed radar came into play, replacing normal instruments, making an illusion of sight. And the voice of the radarman said dismally,

"They're still with us, sir. F-Type cruisers, heavy-armed and plenty fast."

For the next quarter of an hour the *Starsong* gained velocity at a suicidal rate, but the Orion cruisers would not be left behind. The radarman called their coordinates in a steady sing-song and Garstang ordered more power and more power, keeping one eye on the stress indicators and the other on the overhanging star-cliffs of the Throat that seemed to be leaping toward the ship.

There was a limit. You could not take the Throat too fast. In that swarm of suns a ship's fabric could be torn apart in some swift tide of gravity, or vaporized in collision. Garstang had already passed the limit. But the Orionids were refusing to be bluffed.

Kirk said nothing. This was Garstang's job, and he let him do it. But he watched the indicators as closely as the captain. Under his feet and all around him he could feel the *Starsong* quiver, wincing and flinching like a live thing now and again as some wild current wrenched at her. His gaze

flicked upward to the nebula, like a fiery thundercloud above the Dragon's Throat, and then to the shoaling suns below, with the narrow pass between them. The twin red stars of the binary flashed by and were gone.

Suddenly, in the screen that mirrored space astern, a tiny nova flared and winked away. The *Starson* trembled, like a running deer that hears the hunter's gun.

"Wide astern," said Garstang. He looked at the cleft of the Throat and shook his head. "But we'll have to slow down for that, and they know it. They'll have time to range us before they come in themselves. They won't," he added grimly, "have to come in."

Kirk nodded. "So we'll fool them. We won't go into the Throat either."

Garstang stood silent for a moment. Then he said, "I was hoping you wouldn't think of that."

"Have you a better idea? Or even a worse one?"

"No." Garstang took a deep breath and spoke into the communicator. "New course, north and zenith, forty degrees. We're running the nebula. On full autopilot. If anyone wants to pray, go ahead."

THE STARSONG shot upward, plunging high into an area so choked with stellar radiance

that it made the Dragon's Throat seem like empty space. The manual control banks were dark and dead. From the calc-room back of the bridge a new sound came, different from the normal occasional outbursts of chattering. This was a steady sound, a sound of authority, the voice of the *Starson* speaking. She was flying herself now. The men aboard, Captain and Commander, able spaceman and ensign, were her charges, dependent on her wisdom and her radar vision and her strength. There was nothing they could do but wait.

The *Starson* spiralled higher, her radar system guiding her on a twisting path between the clotted stars. Then Kirk saw a great glowing edge slide onto the screen and grow into a vastness of dust and cosmic drift illumined by the half-smothered stars it webbed.

The Orionid cruisers had altered course and were coming after them. But the *Starson* was already skimming through glowing arms that reached like misty tentacles searching for other stars to trap and feed upon. Once in the cloud, she would be screened from the cruiser's radar beams by the most effective scrambling device in space, the nebula itself.

Effective. Yes. But potentially as deadly as Orionid warheads. The only difference was that with

the nebula you had a chance. Against three cruisers you had none.

Kirk strapped himself into the recoil chair beside Garstang. Nothing moved now within the ship. The frail, breakable organism of breath and heart and bone were encased in protective webs. This was the hour of the ship, the hour of steel and flame and the racing electron, faster than thought.

The *Starsong* spoke to herself in the calc-room, and plunged headlong into the cloud.

CHAPTER III

THE UNIVERSE was swallowed up in golden light, in racing, streaming tides of luminous dust. Like an undersea ship of old the *Starsong* raced with the gleaming currents and burst through denser, darker deeps where the stars were faint and far away, to leap once more into a glory of wild light where the drowned suns burned like torches in a mist. And the voice in the calc-room rose to an unhuman crying as the computers strained to take in the overwhelming surge of data from defensive radar, analyze it, and send imperative commands to the control-relays.

It had almost a sound of insane music in it, that voice, and the

Starsong danced to it, whirling and swaying between the fragments of the drift that threatened her with instant destruction if she faltered for a fraction of a second. Kirk, half-dazed, clung to his padded chair and gasped for breath, and felt, and listened.

The same illusion gripped him now that had mastered him before when forced to run a cloud—the feeling that the suns and star worlds were all gone, that he was enwrapped in the primal fire-mists of creation. Mighty tides seemed to bear the ship forward, everything was a boil and whirl of light, millrace currents seemed to rush them endlessly through infinity, with all space and time cancelled out. He wondered briefly, once, how the Orionids were doing, and then forgot them. The agony, the intoxication, the godlike joy and the terror were far too great to admit any petty worries about anything human.

Then, with almost shocking abruptness, they broke into clear space, and the cloud was behind them. Like men enchanted waking from a dream, Kirk and Garstang shook themselves and stood erect again, and the voice of the *Starsong* was stilled, and human voices spoke once more.

And human problems were still with them. Somewhat farther as-

tern now, but still doggedly following, three tiny flecks of darkness came after them out of the cloud.

Kirk went into the com-room and made contact with his squadron far ahead. He gave crisp orders, and then rejoined Garstang on the bridge.

"Larned's on his way," he said. "Can you keep clear?"

"I can," said Garstang, and ordered full power. He had nothing between him and the Pleiades now but light-years of elbow room, and he took full advantage of it. The Orion cruisers apparently had intercepted Kirk's message, and made a frantic last attempt to overhaul him.

When that proved impossible, and their trial shots fell so far short that it was obvious the range could not be made before the *Starsong* reached the point of convergence with the squadron, they turned tail and ran back for the cluster. When the squadron did arrive, space was empty of everything but themselves and the distant stars.

The hard, excited voice of Larned, Kirk's Vice-Commander, came rapidly as they joined the squadron.

"So there is an Orionid base in there! By God, we'll soon—"

"No," Kirk cut in. "There was no base in there. There was a trap, for me—only I still don't know

just why they set it."

He went to the com-room and set up a message on the coding machine. Top secret, to Ferdias at Vega, briefly detailing his encounter with Tauncer.

"—am unable to explain interest in Earth, and your plans concerning. Suggest attempt to distract from some other objective? Await instructions. Kirk."

In a remarkably short time the answer came back.

"Report Vega at once with full squadron." And it added, "Unfortunately, no distraction. Ferdias."

Looking at the cryptic tape, Kirk had an uneasy feeling that he had all unknowingly stepped over one of those thresholds into a new phase of existence, where nothing was going to be quite the same as it had been ever again. He had once more that premonition that the pace, the tempo of the great game for suns, was about to step up still faster.

He said nothing of that to Garstang or the others. To them, the unexpected recall to home base meant an unlooked-for leave. And to him, it would mean returning to Lyllin sooner than he had hoped. But even that could not quite banish his uneasiness.

The squadron wheeled in tight formation and set its course toward the great blue-white sun that

burned in Lyra, capital of a mighty Sector that was in everything but name an empire of stars.

When they made their world-fall, when the squadron swept down through the bluish glare over Vega Town and landed on the spaceport, Larned came at once from his own ship. The Vice-Commander, a blocky, brusque and competent young man, bristled with questions.

"What the devil is all this about, Kirk? Pulling us in like this—"

"I haven't an idea," Kirk said. "But I'm about to find out. Call Lyllin for me and tell her I'll be along soon."

AN AIR CAR with a uniformed driver took him across the great city. It was really two cities. The older city of graceful white towers had been built long ago by the native Vegans, Lyllin's people. But then, more than a century ago, the starships had come to Vega, the first wave of explorers and colonizers from the inner galaxy. They had not been all Earthmen, even though that wave had first started from Earth. By the time they reached here, Earthmen had already mixed and mated with many other human star-folk. It was these newcomers who had built the new part of Vega Town.

It was to the newer city that

the air-car took him, to the looming, dominating mass of Government house. A lift took him down from the roof, and he went through the corridors, a tall man with a faintly worried look on his copper-bronzed face. Efficient secretaries shunted him smoothly and quickly into a room few people ever entered.

It seemed a small room, to be the center of government of so many stars. For this *was* the center—the Sectors each had their elected legislatures but it was the Governors who wielded the power.

"Stop saluting, Kirk," said Ferdias. "You know you're at ease when you step in here."

Ferdias came around the desk. He limped, from the crash of a Class Twenty long ago. But you never remembered his limp, or how small a man he was. You saw only his face, and when you saw it you knew why, at the age of forty, he was one of the five great Governors.

"Now let's have it," he said.

Kirk let him have it, the full story of the trap in the cluster. And Ferdias' face got just a trifle longer.

He said, finally, "You had no business going in alone. But since you got out, I'm glad you did it. For I'm sure now of what I only suspected before. In his eagerness

to find out how much I know, Solleremos has told me what I *wanted* to know."

Kirk, frankly puzzled, said, "I just don't get it. What is Ferdias planning to do about Earth? What plans *would* you have about it?"

Ferdias limped back to his chair, and sat down, and then looked up keenly. "Kirk, you're at least half Earth blood. Tell me, how do you feel about Earth?"

Kirk said, "But I've never been there. You know that—I was born in a transport off Arcturus, and have never been farther back in than Procyon."

"I know. But what do you think about Earth?"

Kirk made a gesture. "What's there to think about? It's a third-rate planet, from what I hear, important only because star-flight began there. Its Galactic Council tried to hold all the galaxy together in one government, but of course that proved impossible. Hell, it's hard enough to hold a Sector together, let alone the whole galaxy."

"But Earth isn't any of the Sectors, of course," said Ferdias.

Kirk looked at him keenly. "Of course not. Sector Governors don't touch Earth's small federal district..." He stopped. He said, after a moment, "Or do they? Do they, Ferdias?"

"Solleremos would like to," said Ferdias.

Kirk was astonished. "You mean, he wants to take *Earth* into Orion Sector?"

"He wants to very much indeed," said the other. "Listen, Kirk. Solleremos' pressure on our borders lately has been only cover-up. It's Earth he's after."

"But *why*? That unimportant little star system—"

"Is it so unimportant?" Ferdias' blue eyes, hot and flaring, now, fascinated Kirk. "Materially, maybe it is—a worn-out, third-rate world. But psychologically, it's a very important world indeed. Think of the Earth-blood mingled in all the galaxy races now—in you and in me, in half the civilized peoples! Think of the feelings they have, perhaps without altogether realizing it, toward that old planet they've never seen! They know it no longer directs things, they know its Council and Navy are a shadowy sham—but still it's Earth, it's the old center of things, the old heart-world. Suppose one of the other Governors gets Earth into his Sector, and speaks from it thereafter?"

KIRK SAW it now. He realized, not for the first time, that when it came to galactic intrigue he was a babe in arms.

It *would* give any of the rival Governors a colossal psychological advantage, to make the old center of the galaxy his seat of government. Commands that came from Earth would have a psychological potency hard to withstand.

"But you're not going to let Solleremos get away with it?" he exclaimed.

"No Kirk. I don't want Earth. But I'm not going to let Orion Sector grab it, either!"

He went on. "Solleremos knows I'll try to stop him. That's why he had Tauncer, his right-hand man, set that little trap for you. They know I trust you. They hoped I'd have told you how I plan to block them."

Kirk looked at him, and then said, "How *are* you going to stop them?"

Ferdias said, "There's a big celebration coming up on Earth soon. The two-hundredth anniversary of the first space-flight from Earth. It means a lot to them. Their Council invited me to send an official delegation to represent Lyra Sector. So I'm sending you."

Kirk stared. "Me—to Earth? But what can I do if—"

Ferdias interrupted. "The Fifth Squadron will go with you. To take part in the commemoration pageant, the fly-over."

Now Kirk began to understand.

"Then if Solleremos tries anything, the Fifth will be there waiting for him?"

"Exactly." Ferdias spoke the word like a wolf-snap. "I know Solleremos' intentions. I know about when he plans his grab for Earth. Earth can't stop him, not with their small forces. But the Fifth can!"

Kirk felt a bit stunned. Fighting the hidden border wars of the rival Governors was one thing. But a full-fledged struggle between Sectors, back there at old Earth, was quite another. It could rock the galaxy . . .

Ferdias went on matter-of-factly, "You'll take off five days from now. You may be there a while, so you'll take full supply auxiliaries and transports."

Kirk looked up. Transports meant the families of all personnel would accompany the squadron—and that meant Lyllin would go with him. He was glad of that.

"But when we get there," he said. "Besides taking part in that celebration, what do we *do*?"

Ferdias said, "Go and look up your ancestral home."

"My — what?"

"Ancestral home. Place where the Kirks came from, on Earth. I had it hunted out, and it's still standing. It's in Orville, a place near the city New York. You go

and look it up first thing."

Kirk began to get it. "You'll send me orders there?"

"You'll hear from me. And you'll get warning if Solleremos moves on Earth. But Kirk—one more thing."

"Yes?"

"You're not to talk of this to anyone. *Anyone.*"

KIRK, as the air-car took him homeward across the city, hardly saw the brilliant Vegan capital flashing by beneath. He was badly worried. A deadly, secret galactic struggle was moving toward crisis, and he was not the man to combat conspiracies, he was no good at plots and plans. But—and his jaw set hard—if Solleremos *did* try to grab Earth by force, there was one thing the Fifth was very good at, and that was fighting.

He couldn't tell Lyllin about any of this, not against Ferdias' strict injunction. But at least she would be going with him this time, and that would be good news to her. He strode eagerly into the metalloy cottage that was home to him. Its familiar rooms were cool and silent. He found Lyllin waiting for him on the terrace.

The blue sun was touching the hills, and the sky was flooded with a purple dusk. Lyllin came toward

him. She was all Vegan and looked it, her flesh showed pale as new gold, with the darker masses of her hair picking up the same tint and turning it to copper. She was dressed in the fashion of her own people, in a chiton so mistily transparent that her fine slender body seemed to be draped in a bit of the oncoming dusk itself.

He held her, and then told her his news, and was surprised that it did not seem to make her happy. "To Earth?" she murmured. "Just for the space-flight anniversary? It's strange—"

"But this time you'll be with me," he said. "Not on the voyage—you'll ride transport, of course—but on Earth, all the time I'm there."

"How long will that be, Kirk?"

He didn't know, and said so. Lyllin's face shadowed subtly. But she had a way of silence, and it was not until later that night that she spoke of it.

She said, suddenly, "I shall hate it at Earth."

Kirk was shocked. "But why in the world? That's ridiculous. A place you've never seen, and hardly know about—"

"It's your place, your people. Not mine." She was not looking at him. "You'll be going home. But what will they think of me there? What will *you* think of me there,

among your own people?"

Kirk turned her around with rough and angry hands. "I'm ashamed of you. If you could even think a thing like that—" He shook her. "Listen to me. Earth is no more to me than it is to you. It's a name, a place where my grandfather five times removed happened to be born. I've as much blood of other worlds in me as Earth blood. And as for you—"

Her eyes had tears in the corners of them, now. Her mouth was soft and uncertain, like a child's. He said, in a different tone, "No matter where we go, you'll be Lyllin. And I'll love you."

She came close in the circle of his arms, and she kissed him with a wild possessiveness. And her lips were bitter with those sudden tears.

But Kirk felt that she was not convinced. She had the Vegan pride, and if they treated her at Earth like a freak, an alien . . .

In the depth of his soul, he cursed Sollereinos and his ambitious schemes. For the worry that was in him had deepened. The danger that the Fifth was going into, the danger that would explode if that unscrupulous grab for the old planet was attempted, was not the only one. He felt now that beside that there was another, subtler danger waiting for Lyllin and himself at Earth.

CHAPTER IV

THE SQUADRON was out of overdrive, cruising at normal approach velocity. There was a sun ahead in space. Compared to the blazing giants of deep space, it was not much, merely a small yellow star looking rather lonely in the midst of a great emptiness. Kirk studied it. The Sun. Not just any sun, *the* Sun. How should he feel about it? Like a child seeing its father for the first time, or like a man returning to an ancient hearth that has long ago lost any meaning for him? Kirk searched his heart, and nothing came. It was only another star.

Garstang touched his arm and pointed, to where far off a little green planet swung to meet them. "Earth."

The squadron rushed toward it, the cruisers and supply-ships and transports, the men and women and children, strangers from the far reaches of the galaxy. And yet not quite strangers either, for the names that had come from this world were still among them, and the traditions, and even some of the blood. Two hundred years ago, their forefathers had left it. And now they were coming back.

A quiet had settled on the bridge. Kirk supposed it was the same with the whole squadron, everybody

staring and thinking his or her own thoughts. He wondered what Lyllin was thinking, and wished she were with him instead of back there in one of the transports.

Earth came closer. He could see clouds, and the white splash of a polar cap. Closer still, and there were seas, and the outlines of continents. Colors began to show more clearly, and the land became ridged with mountain chains. Great lakes took form, and dark green areas of forest, and winding rivers. A nice world. A pretty world. Kirk hated it. Its other name was Trouble.

"Why did Ferdias have to pick *us* for this job?"

Unconsciously he had spoken aloud, or loud enough for Garstang to hear. "It's only for a visit," said Garstang. "Just a celebration. What's wrong with that?" His tone was mild, without mockery.

But Kirk looked at him sharply. He knew that Garstang and Larned and all his other officers and men must have been talking and wondering. Wondering why they'd been pulled out of their needful place for this rather meaningless celebration.

They came down past the shoreline of a blue-green ocean, past a city that sprawled over islands and peninsulas and up inland river valleys, and then beneath them was

a big spaceport. The squadron roared in to its appointed landing, bristling on its best behavior, every ship set down with masterly precision, and there was a crowd assembled there to meet it. Flags whipped in the wind. The brassy music of a band blared out, immensely stirring with a solemn throb of drums beneath it.

The men of the Fifth debarked and formed in marching order, every boot polished and every uniform immaculate, a solid line of blue and silver glittering in the soft blaze of this golden sun. Kirk felt the heat of it in his face. His heels struck solidly on the ground, and the wind touched him, balmily, laden with fragrances strange to him. And he thought, "This is Earth." He looked around at it.

He could see only the spaceport, and that was old and worn and poor. The tarmac was cracked and blackened, the ancient buildings weathered. Opposite the squadron were drawn up twelve cruisers with the old insignie of the Galactic Navy on their bows, and with their crews standing at attention in front of them. Those old, small ships—why, they were Class Fourteens, obsolete for years! He supposed they were all Earth had.

Two men walked toward him. One was a middle-aged civilian, the other an arrow-straight, elder-

ly man in black uniform that also bore the old Navy insigne. He stiffly returned Kirk's salute.

"Nice landing, Commander," he said. "I'm First Admiral Laney, and I welcome your squadron."

INCREDULOUSLY, Kirk realized that the old admiral was keeping up the pretense that the Fifth Squadron was still part of the Navy.

It was so preposterous it was funny! Not for a century had the old Galactic Navy had any real existence. Its staff never sent any orders out to the squadrons of the five Governors, any more than Central Council dared send orders to the Governors themselves. Yet this old Earth officer was trying hard, in front of the crowd, to act as though he really were Kirk's superior officer . . .

Then, seeing the faintly desperate look in Laney's eyes, Kirk softened. After all, what difference did it make—it was only a pretense and he felt sorry for the old chap trying to play this part.

He saluted again and said, "Fifth Squadron, Kirk commanding, reporting for orders, sir!"

A look of grateful relief crossed Laney's face. He said uncertainly, "At ease, Commander. Let me present Council Chairman John Charteris."

Charteris, a graying, eager, anxious man, shook hands warmly. He began a little speech, into the telecameras close by. "We welcome back one of the gallant squadrons of the Galactic Navy to take part in our commemoration of—"

When the speeches and handshaking and bandplaying were over, Kirk gave an order, and his men broke ranks. Larned came up to him.

"Shall we debark our people now?"

The old admiral told Kirk, "Quarters are all ready for them."

Charteris said, "But you and your wife, Commander, must be my guests."

They walked back between the lofty, looming ships. The women and children and babies of the men of the Fifth started coming out of the transports, and efficient Earth officers began smoothly shuttling them into cars to take them to their quarters. From around the fences, a big crowd of Earth folk watched interestedly.

Of a sudden, for the first time his men's families seemed a little outlandish to Kirk. The women and children were of so many different star-peoples, so many different ways of speech and dress. He looked resentfully for amusement in the Earth faces, but could not detect any.

At the transport he excused himself and went in to Lyllin's cabin. He stopped short when he saw her. He had never seen her like this. She wore an Earth-style dress of impeccable lines, was perfect in a smart, sophisticated way. She still didn't look like an Earth-woman, not with that skin and eyes and hair. But she looked stunning, and he said so.

"I'm glad I look civilized enough for your people," Lyllin said sweetly.

"My people?" Kirk drew back stiffly. "So you're still brooding on that? That's fine. I'm not in a tough enough spot here, my wife has to get super-sensitive and make it tougher."

Lyllin's expression changed. "What kind of spot?" He was silent. She looked at him steadily. "It's something dangerous, isn't it?"

"I'd have told you if it were something I could tell you," he said. "You know that. Will you forget it? And forget about these people being *my* people!"

He went out with her, and Lyllin went through the introductions, cool and proud. Kirk told Larned aside, "Two-day leaves for all personnel in regular rotation. Port facilities will take care of refitting and fueling."

Larned grunted. "I've seen better

facilities on fifth-rate planets. Plenty old! But we'll make out."

Charteris' car swept them along a broad highway to New York. It had a stiff, strange look to Kirk, its vertical towers huddled together bold and black against the setting sun. He thought it a cramped and crowded place, though Charteris' terrace apartment high above the myriad lights was pleasant.

There was a dinner there that night, and drinks, and more speeches, and much talk about the Commemoration. Sector politics were unobtrusively avoided. Kirk fretted and worried through it all. What was Sollereinos doing, where were his squadrons? Ferdias had said he'd get warning if they moved, but would that warning come in time?

In the morning, he found Charteris oddly changed. He looked at Kirk with a queerly doubtful expression.

Kirk said, "Before we make arrangements about the Commemoration, I—"

"Oh, there's no hurry about that," Charteris said hastily. Then suddenly he asked, "Do you know if Orion Sector will send a token squadron too?"

A LARM rang a bell in Kirk's brain instantly. What was

behind the question? Had Charteris heard something that he hadn't?

He answered, "Why, no, I don't. But surely you would know—"

Charteris continued to eye him with that dubious expression as he said, "We sent an invitation to Governor Solleremos to take part, of course. But doubtless we'll soon hear from him."

Kirk thought swiftly, he *has* heard something—something that he doesn't want me to know! But what? Was Orion already moving, were Orionid forces coming to Earth on the excuse of the celebration, just as he had?

He'd get no information from Charteris. He'd better contact Ferdias, as quickly as possible. He was only a naval commander, and he felt an enormous desire for definite orders in this crisis. He could only get such orders at the rendezvous Ferdias had told him to go to.

Kirk said casually, "While I'm here on Earth I want to look up my ancestors' old home here, and now would be a good time. It's in a village not too far away, I understand. If we could borrow a ground-car—"

Charteris seemed glad to comply. "Of course. A sentimental pilgrimage, in a way? Very understandable—"

Kirk refused the offer of a driver. But by the time he and Lyllin got out of New York and were rolling northward, he almost regretted that decision. It seemed ridiculous for a man who could pilot a squadron half across the galaxy in full overdrive, but the traffic frightened him. He hadn't done much driving, and certainly none on highways like this big northern boulevard. On this crowded Earth, people apparently still used ground-cars in great numbers for short distances, and it was not until they branched off on a subsidiary highway that Kirk felt easy.

He said then, "I want to explain about this ancestral home business."

Lyllin, looking straight ahead, said, "You don't have to explain. It's perfectly natural that you should want to see where your people came from."

"Will you stop behaving like a woman and listen?" he said angrily. "My people, again. What the devil would I care where my seventh great-grandfather lived. I'm doing what Ferdias ordered." He added, "I wasn't supposed to tell you even that, but I couldn't very well go off on this supposed sentimental pilgrimage without you."

Lyllin's expression changed. "Then there'll be someone from

Ferdias to meet you there secretly, is that it? And I'm not to know about what?"

"That's it," he said. "Ferdias' orders were not to tell anyone."

He thought that Lyllin looked somehow relieved. "I don't mind. I'm worried, I wish I knew, but it's all right if you can't tell me."

It came to him that she was relieved to learn he didn't really care about his Earth ancestors, that that had only been an excuse.

Kirk felt a sharp relief himself, to be on his way to Orville, to the old house there where Ferdias' agent would be waiting to tell him what to do. In this gathering crisis he couldn't act blindly! It was vital to get directive information as soon as possible.

They turned off the big boulevard onto quiet, tree-lined back roads. These roads were old and rambling, accomodatingly twisting around hills and ponds and even houses. Some of the houses were modern chromaloy villas, but there were antique stone houses also, and once he and Lyllin both exclaimed when they saw a very old house that was built all of wood.

Out here away from the city, everything looked ancient. Stone fences that had the moss of centuries on them, a steeped church mantled thick with ivy, worn fields

that had been tilled for ages. In the fields, driverless automatic tractors were lumbering about their work, but there seemed little bustle or activity. Kirk thought that this was an old, worn world . . .

A brilliant bird flashed across the road and he and Lyllin argued what it was. "A robin, I think," Kirk said doubtfully. "In school, when I was little, we had an old Earth poem about Robin Redbreast. I didn't know then what it was."

"Not nearly so splendid as a flame-bird," Lyllin said. "But the red of it, and the green trees, and the blue sky . . . It's a pretty world, in its way."

THEY ROLLED finally down a little hill and over a bridged stream into the town of Orville. It was only a village, with shops around a big open square. There was a corroded statue of a soldier at the center of the park, and benches on which old men sat in the sun.

Kirk asked directions of a merchant standing in front of his shop, a chubby man who stared open-mouthed at the two visitors. And Kirk suddenly realized how strange indeed they must look in this sleepy little Earth village—he in his blue-and-silver starman's uniform, his face dark from for-

eign suns, and Lyllin whose beauty was a breath of the alien.

He was glad to drive on out of the village, on the designated road. It was an even more rambling road, looping casually along the side of a shallow valley whose neat farms and fields and woods lay silent in the blaze of the soft golden sun. They met no other ground-cars, though an occasional air-car hummed across the blue sky. Kirk kept counting houses, and when he had counted five he turned in at a lane, and stopped.

The house was of field-stone, an ancient, brown dumpy structure that had a faintly forlorn, deserted look. Under the big, stiff, dark-green trees in its front yard—were they the trees called “pines?”—the grass was high and ragged. The lane went on past the house, past an orchard of gnarled trees heavy with green fruit, to a big old barn. There was no one in sight, and no sign that anyone was here.

“Are you sure it’s the place?” asked Lyllin.

He nodded, moving toward the porch. “It’s the place. Ferdias had his agent here buy it, weeks ago, so we’d have this quiet place for contacts. There should be someone here.”

There was a bell-push at the door, but no one answered it. Kirk

tried the door. It swung open, and they went in.

They went into a room such as they had never seen before. The walls were of painted wood, instead of plastic. The furniture was wooden too, and of archaic design. The room, the house, were very silent.

“Look at this,” said Lyllin, in tones of surprise.

She was touching a chair, and the chair rocked back and forth on its bottom. “I thought it was a child’s toy but it’s not made for a child.”

He shook his head. “Beyond me. And it’s beyond me too why Ferdias’ man isn’t here!”

He called, but there was no answer. He went through all the rooms, and there was no one.

Kirk felt a mounting alarm. Had something gone wrong with Ferdias’ careful plans? Where was Ferdias’ agent, where was the man who should have met him in this secret rendezvous with the information and orders he must have?

Suppose that man didn’t come—who then could give him warning of Sollereimos’ strike, if Orion *did* strike?

CHAPTER V

KIRK STOOD, his dismay and anxiety increasing by the

minute. What was he going to do?

He said, finally, "We'll have to wait. Ferdias' man is bound to be along soon."

"You mean—perhaps stay here all night?" said Lyllin. "But food, and beds—"

"We'd better look around," he said unhappily.

They found fairly new blankets on the beds. And in the old kitchen cupboards was food in the self-heating plastipacks.

"We can make out," he said. "But it's a hell of a thing."

While Lyllin prepared their supper, he went out and restlessly walked around the place. The weedy yard ran into brushy fields and nearby woods. The old barn was empty, and the outbuildings were shabby and forlorn.

He did not think much of Earth, if this was a sample. He went back inside, and helped Lyllin solve the puzzle of an ancient sink. Even the reddening sunset light pouring through the windows could not make the old wooden walls and worn cupboards look less dingy.

He said so, and Lyllin smiled. "It's not so bad. We'll eat out on that back porch—it's less musty there."

The porch was not screened, and friendly insects dropped in upon them as they ate. The whole

western sky was a flare of red, great bastions of crimson cloud building ever higher. Under the sunset, beyond the fields, the ragged woods brooded darkly.

A small animal came soundlessly out of the high grass and stared at them with greenish eyes.

"What is it, Kirk—a wild creature?"

He looked. "It's a cat, that's what it is. An Earthman in the *Stardream* had one for a pet, kept it at Base. He called it Tom." He tossed a bit of food onto the step. "Here, Tom."

The cat stalked carefully forward, eyed them coldly, then bent to the food. After a moment it turned its back on them and departed.

Darkness fell. Kirk began to feel a little desperation. Ferdias' man hadn't come. What if he didn't come at all? How long could they wait in this forgotten backwater, not knowing what was going on out there in deep space?

Lyllin said, "Isn't it possible your man is waiting in Orville, that village—and doesn't know you're here?"

"It could be, I suppose." Kirk grasped at the straw. "I'll go down to the village. If he's there, he'll see me. Mind waiting—just in case someone does come here?"

She said she didn't mind. But

he took the compact shocker from his coat-pocket and left it for her before he went out.

Kirk drove rapidly down the lonely, dark road to the village. But the little town looked dark and lonely too, when he got there. The shops were almost all closed. He saw only a few people. It was very quiet. In the shadows of the square, the old iron soldier stood stiffly.

The lights of a tavern caught Kirk's eye, and he went toward it. It seemed about the only place where his man might be, and he needed a drink anyway. He shouldered in, and instantly a small buzz of talk fell silent. Kirk went to the bar, and the men at the farther end of it followed him with their eyes. The tavern-keeper, a bustling, skinny man, hurried up and tried to act as though a deep-space naval Commander was no unusual visitor at all.

"Yes, sir, what'll it be?"

Kirk's eyes searched the rack of unfamiliar bottles. He shook his head. "You pick it. Something strong and short."

"Yes, sir, some fine old whisky right here." Whisky—well, he'd heard of that. He drank it, and didn't like it. He let his eyes rest on the other man. Could one of them be Ferdias' agent?

He didn't think so. Most of these men looked like farmers or me-

chanics, hearty-looking, sunburned men; the younger ones tall and gangling. One was a very old man with a straggling beard who shamelessly stared at Kirk with bright, beady eyes. They weren't unfriendly, but they were aloof. Kirk had an idea he'd get little out of this insular bunch. He might as well go—none of these could be Ferdias' man.

But as he set his glass down, the bearded old man limped forward, peering bright-eyed and inquisitive at him.

"You're the fellow who was asking directions to the old Kirk place today," he said, almost accusingly.

Kirk nodded. "That's right."

THE OLD Earthman was obviously waiting for an explanation. It occurred to Kirk that he'd better give one, if he didn't want this whole countryside wondering audibly why a starman had come here.

He said, "Kirk's my name. My great-great something grandfather, a long time ago, came from here. I'm just looking up the old place, that's all."

He turned to go then, feeling that he was wasting time here. But one of the middle-aged Earthmen came forward to him with hand outstretched.

"Why, if your folks came from here, that makes you sort of an Orville boy, doesn't it? What do you know about that! Vinson's my name, Captain."

"Commander," Kirk corrected, as he shook hands. "Glad to know you. I guess I'll be on my way."

"Say, now, not without me buying you a drink," boomed Vinson. "Not every day one of our own boys comes back from way out there."

There was a chorus of agreement, and more outstretched hands, and hearty introductions. Kirk stared at them in wonder. What in the world—Then he got it.

All over space, the pride of Earthmen was proverbial, and their clannishness. He'd met it and he didn't like it. He was therefore all the more astonished now, that they should suddenly accept him as one of their own. Seven generations, and the whole width of the galaxy between him and this place, yet they claimed him as "one of our own boys"!

He wanted to get out now, he'd found no trace of Ferdias' agent here and time was passing, but it wasn't easy to get out. More men kept coming into the tavern, as word got around, to shake hands with and buy a drink for the "Orville boy" from far-off space. Vinson, a jovial master of ceremonies,

rattled on with introductions Kirk only half-heard—"Jim Barnes, whose farm's up beyond your folks' old place", "here's old Pete Marly, he can remember when there were still Kirks living there," on and on until in desperation, Kirk thanked them and shouldered toward the door.

"Have to go, my wife's waiting," he said, and a friendly chorus of voices bade him goodnight, "I'll ride with you far as my own house," said Vinson.

Kirk was sweating as he drove out of the village. A hell of a way to conduct a secret job, with the whole village bawling his name! And it had got him nowhere—

Vinson's house was the second on the same road. As he got out of the car, he said, "Sure does beat all, your coming back from so far. Shows it's a small world."

"It's a small galaxy," Kirk said, and Vinson nodded. "Sure is. Well, I'll be seeing you. Drop over. Goodnight."

As Kirk drove on, he was faintly startled by an upgush of yellow light that silhouetted the bending trees ahead. A great segment of silver was rising in the sky. Then he realized—it was that moon that they'd passed on their way in.

The moon of Earth, the "Moon" of the old Earth poems people still read. Not too impressive, but pret-

ty. But how the threads of all you'd read and heard kept subtly running back to this old planet! He supposed some of these flowers whose fragrance he could smell on the warm night air were "roses". Funny, how much you knew about Earth that you didn't realize you knew.

THE OLD road gleamed beneath the rising moon. He glanced up at the star-pricked sky. Had the Kirk who was his seventh grandfather, all those years ago, looked at the starry sky as he walked this same road? He must have. He'd looked too long, and finally he'd gone out to that sky and not come back.

The house was dark when he turned in at the lane, but he saw Lyllin's dim figure sitting on the front porch.

"No. No one came," she said, as he sat down beside her.

"And no sign of any agent of Ferdias in the village," Kirk said. "A fine thing. We'll have to wait."

They sat a while in the soft warm darkness. Kirk's thoughts were more and more gloomy. They couldn't wait here forever, yet he had to make contact as Ferdias had ordered—

Strange, glowing little sparks of light drifted across his vision, and now he became aware that the

whole dark yard and woods were swarming with such floating sparks. They winked on and off, in a fashion he had never seen, dancing and whirling under the dark trees.

"What are they?" asked Lyllin, fascinated.

"Fireflies?" Kirk said doubtfully. "I remember that word, from somewhere . . ."

Then he suddenly started and exclaimed, "Hell, what—"

A small sinuous body had suddenly plopped into his lap. Two green eyes looked insolently up at him. It was the cat.

"It's very tame," said Lyllin. "It must have been somebody's pet."

"Probably belonged to the last people who lived here, Kirk said. "It's tame, all right."

He stroked its furry back. The cat half-closed its eyes and emitted a rusty purring sound. "Like that, eh, Tom?"

Tom settled down cozily, in answer. Lyllin reached to stroke its head.

With startling swiftness, the cat recoiled from her and leaped off Kirk's lap. It stared green-eyed back at them, then started across the lawn.

Kirk turned, laughing. "Crazy little critter—" He stopped suddenly. "Lyllin, what's the matter?"

She was crying and he had rare-

ly seen her cry. "Did it scratch you?"

"No. But it feared me, and hated me," she said. "Because it knew I'm alien."

Kirk said, "Oh, rot. The wretched beast is just afraid of strangers."

"It wasn't afraid of you. It sensed that I'm different—"

He put his arm around her, mentally cursing Tom. Then, as he wrathfully looked after the cat, Kirk stiffened.

Tom had started across the lawn toward the dark brush nearby. But the cat had stopped. And, as Kirk looked, Tom suddenly emitted a hiss and recoiled. It went away from the dark clumps, in long swift leaps.

Kirk's thoughts raced. The cat had recoiled from that brush, exactly as it had recoiled from Lyllin. For the same reason? Because someone alien, not of Earth, was in those shadows? He thought he could hear a slight sound, and his muscles suddenly strung tight. Ferdias' agent wouldn't approach so secretly. Non-Earthmen skulking in those shadows meant only one thing.

He said, "Come on in the house and forget it, Lyllin. I could stand another drink—"

But instantly, when inside the house, Kirk made a lunge toward the nearest bedroom and grabbed

for the blankets there. He tossed one of the blankets to Lyllin with frantic speed.

"Wrap it around your head—*quick!*"

She was intelligent. But she was not used to obeying orders instantly and without question "Kirk, what—"

He grabbed the blanket out of her hands and started wrapping it many times around her head, speaking in a whisper as he did so.

"Out there. Someone. If they want to be quiet about it, they're sure to use a sonic knockout-beam. *Hurry—*"

HE PULLED her to the floor. The blanket swathed her head. He wrapped the other one around his own head, fold after fold. They lay, tense, waiting.

Nothing happened.

He thought how foolish they would look, lying on the floor with their heads swathed, if nothing at all did happen.

He still did not move. He waited.

A series of small sounds began in the back of the house, just vaguely audible through the blanket-folds. A chattering of windows, creaking and rattling of beams, clink of dishes.

The sounds came slowly through the house toward them. *Chatter,*

rattle—leisurely advancing. He knew then he'd guessed right. The sonic beam itself was pitched too low to hear. But it was sweeping the house.

It hit them. Lyllin stirred suddenly with a small sound, and Kirk gripped her arm, holding her down. He knew what she was feeling. He felt it himself, the sudden shocking dizziness, the keening, inside his head. Even through the swathings of thick blanket, the beam made itself felt. Without protection they'd already be unconscious.

The shock passed. The beam was sweeping on to the front of the house. Kirk remained on the floor, his hand still holding Lyllin's arm. He'd used sonics himself. He had a pretty good idea of how this one would be used.

He was right. The small, half-audible sounds of the house and its shuddering contents came walking back toward them.

Chatter—clink. Rattle—clink—

It hit him again, and he set his teeth and endured it. And again it passed them, and once more the kitchen dishes started talking.

Kirk suddenly thought of the unsuspecting Earth folk in the nearby farms, sleeping peacefully in their old houses, without ever a dream that in their quiet countryside, alien folk from the stars were pitted in a secret struggle

that had this whole ancient planet as its prize.

The sounds shut off abruptly. Kirk unwrapped his head, and twitched at Lyllin till she did the same. He made a warning motion to her, to keep down, and he himself crawled forward to the old living-room. He had the little shocker in his hand now.

In a corner of the living-room, behind a grotesque old table, he waited. There was no sound at all.

Then there was one. Footsteps, on the porch outside—coming fast and confidently to the door.

A man came into the room. He wore a dark space-jacket and slacks, he carried a shocker, and he walked like a dancing panther.

Kirk knew him.

His name was Taucer.

CHAPTER VI

BEHIND Taucer came an older man, as gray and solid and rough at the edges as an old brick. He could have been an Earthman, and probably was. He was loaded down with a porto, and some other piece of equipment in a carrying case slung over his shoulders.

Taking no chances at all, but allowing himself to feel a deep and vicious pleasure, Kirk fired from behind the table.

Even so, warned by some faint

sound or perhaps only by the instinct of the hunter, Tauncer swung toward him in the instant before the burst of energy hit. He did not quite have time to fire. The impetus of the turn made him hurtle halfway across the room to hit the floor headlong.

The brick-like man was slower. He had only managed to open his mouth and lift his hand halfway toward his armpit when Kirk's second blast dropped him quietly where he stood.

Kirk got up. He found that he was shaking. He looked down at Tauncer, thinking how easily a man could die, flexing his fingers in a hungry way. Lyllin came into the open doorway, and he said angrily,

"You were to stay back there."

Her eyes did not leave his face. She murmured, "Yes. I did wrong." Then, looking at the sprawled bodies, "Are they dead?"

"We're not out on the Sector frontier," Kirk growled. "I wish we were. But here on these old planets they take violence seriously. No, I just used stunning bursts on them."

He rummaged the house until he found wire, and bound the hands of the two men very securely behind them. Then he searched them. He did not find any documents, which was no surprise. He

removed a shocker from the brick-like man, and took it and the porto and the heavy carrying case far out of reach.

The carrying case contained a vera-ray projector with its tripod collapsed. Possibly the same one Tauncer had tried to use on him in the cluster world. Tauncer seemed extremely fond of the vera-ray. Probably, in his business, he never traveled without one.

He gave Lyllin the shocker that Tauncer had dropped. "Watch them. Back in a moment."

He went out and rapidly, carefully, searched the grounds of the old farmhouse. He found the sonic device squatting heavily behind a bush. He stood by it for some moments, perfectly still, listening, but there was no sound except the faint stirring of the breeze. There did not seem to be anyone else around. Tauncer and the Earthman must have come alone. Kirk frowned. He picked up the sonic device and stood for a second longer, uneasy but baffled. There was no sign of an air-car. They must have landed far back in the woods to avoid betraying themselves by the noise of the motors. But he could not search the whole woods, not to-night.

He went back to the house.

"They're coming around," said Lyllin. She was sitting in a chair

in front of the two bound men, watching them. She rocked back and forth in a rhythmic motion, making the old floorboards squeak. "Look," she said, in a voice just a little too high, "I found out what this queer chair is for. It's rather pleasant."

"I don't find it so," said Tauncer suddenly. "The creaking irritates me." He opened his eyes, and Kirk had the feeling that he had been keeping them closed for some time, shamming, while he took stock of the situation.

"Well," he said to Kirk. "I'm an acknowledged expert with the sono-beam. Would you mind telling me how you did it?"

Kirk said, "We had warning—a friend of mine named Tom." He motioned Lyllin to get up. "Go on in the other room, dear. I don't think you'd enjoy this."

She looked at him as though he was someone she had just met and was not sure she liked.

"Try to understand," he said. "I don't do this sort of thing every day. It's hardly ever necessary."

"Of course" she said. She went into the next room, and he shut the door behind her. Then he sat down in the rocking chair, with the shocker held ready in his hand.

KIRK LOOKED at Tauncer.

"I'm a peaceful man," he said, "and I have no move is not known to me, and

"visiting my ancestral home. What did you want with me?"

Tauncer smiled. There was something about him that made Kirk more and more uneasy—a lack of concern, a deep-based confidence that didn't fit a man in his position.

Tauncer said gently, "You are the Commander of the Fifth Squadron, Lyra Sector, awaiting orders from your Governor. You are wasting your time."

Kirk's nerves tightened painfully, but he kept his face impassive. "Go on," he said. "I'm listening."

"Ferdias' agent was supposed to meet you here secretly with certain information," Tauncer spoke with deliberate clarity, as one who explains some problem to a child. "He is not coming. We've known who he is, for some time. And I got to him, before he ever left New York." He nodded to the vera-ray projector across the room. "I used that extremely useful invention on him, and of course he told me all about this place and how he was supposed to meet you here. So I came instead."

Kirk looked at the vera-ray himself, but Tauncer shook his head. "It wouldn't do you any good. The particular piece of information you need—namely, when and where to

your contact man had not received it yet either. When it does come through, one of our men will get it—probably already have.”

Tauncer's eyes looked up brightly at Kirk, the eyes of the adroit and wily man measuring the honest clod for another defeat.

“You might just as well free me, Kirk. It was a good try, but your cause is hopeless now.”

“Not as long as I'm on my feet.” said Kirk, getting up. He was a very angry man. “Not as long as the Fifth will follow me. If I don't get orders, I'll make my own.”

“No.” said a familiar voice behind him. “The Fifth isn't going anywhere, Commander.”

Kirk whirled around.

Joe Garstang was standing in the front door. He had a shocker in his hand, pointing with rocklike steadiness at Kirk's breast.

“Drop your weapon,” said Garstang.

A red haze swept over Kirk's vision. Through it he saw Garstang, wavering and distorted. Blood hammered in his temples. “You,” he said, so choked with rage at this enormity that he could hardly form the words. “My own captain. My friend. Traitor. Working for him—”

Distant and strange in the red mist, Garstang's face became twisted as though with pain.

“I'm sorry,” he said, and fired.

Kirk fell onto the floor. Garstang must have pressed the stud back to a light charge, because Kirk was still conscious and only partly paralyzed. His own weapon dropped out of his nerveless fingers.

Garstang came and kicked it away. Kirk flopped around like a gaffed fish, trying to get his reflexes working again. He heard the inner door open, and then Lyllin screamed, partly in fear but mostly in fury, a purely animal sound. She went for Garstang, ignoring his shocker, with a single-minded intent to kill. Her own hands were empty. She was content with them.

Garstang dropped his weapon in his pocket and caught her, holding her hands away from his face and eyes.

“Please,” he said. “Please, Lyl-
lin. He's not dead, he's not even hurt.” He turned to Kirk. “You should have dropped your shocker. I told you.” There was a fresh onslaught, and a red line sprang out on Garstang's cheek. It began to drip slowly, small bright drops against the leathery brown. “Kirk, for God's sake call her off,” he said.

Kirk managed to sit up. He mumbled, shook his head two or three times, and finally the words were intelligible. “I'm all right. Come here, Lyllin. Help me up.”

She relaxed then, dropping her hands. Garstang let her go. She hissed at him in furious Vegan and then ran to Kirk. "I should have used that weapon," she said. "I should have killed him. I forgot it. I'm sorry." She began to struggle, trying to lift him.

GARSTANG went immediately into the next room. Through the open door Kirk saw him look around and then pocket the shocker that Lyllin had laid down and forgotten. Lyllin didn't notice, and he said nothing. What was the use?

"Push that chair over here," Kirk said. "Now don't worry, this'll wear off. I'll be all right in just a few minutes. Yes. That's it."

He sat in the rocker, rubbing his numb right arm with his left, trying to stamp his foot, but he couldn't move it yet. He glared up at Garstang, who had come and was standing near Tauncer, looking from him to Kirk with a faint frown.

Tauncer had not spoken, and he did not speak now. He sat where he was and waited, and watched them.

"Well," said Kirk, "what are you waiting for, Joe? Go ahead and untie him."

"No," said Garstang, shaking his head slowly. "No, I'm not going

to untie him."

"Why not?" demanded Kirk bitterly. "Or have you decided to double-cross him, too?"

"I don't think you understand," said Garstang. "I'm not working with Tauncer. I'm not working for Solleremos at all."

Kirk stared, for a moment surprised out of his rage. "But then who—"

"My loyalty," said Garstang, "is to Earth."

"Oh, hell, that doesn't make sense," said Kirk. "You're no more Earthman than I am—"

"I am, Kirk. You never knew it, but I'm all Earthman. And I've been in Earth Intelligence for fourteen years."

Garstang went on slowly. "Earth may be old and partly helpless, but she is not so blind as to let five powerful hungry Governors go unwatched. We've seen this grab coming for a long time. The only thing we didn't know, and couldn't find out, was which one of the five would try it first. But now I think we know."

"What do you think you know?" said Kirk.

Garstang looked at him steadily. "Ferdias was the only Governor who sent a squadron to Earth, for the Commemoration. Why?"

Kirk cried, "To protect Earth from Solleremos! It's Orion who's

going to try the grab!"

"I thought you'd say that, Kirk. Maybe you believe it. But ask yourself—if that's so, why didn't Ferdias warn us openly? Why did he have you sneak off to this undercover rendezvous?"

Garstang shook his head. "No, Kirk. I think you're an honest man. And I think you've been had. I think you've been had all the way."

CHAPTER VII

KIRK BEGAN to laugh. He laughed until tears of rage and desperation stood in his eyes.

"Christ," he said, "If Earth agents are all as bright as you are, Joe, God help her."

He pointed to Tauncer. "Allow me to introduce you. This is Tauncer, Selleremos' right-hand man."

Garstang nodded. "I know."

"I've just fought him off, and now I have to fight you. A fine thing. A damn fine thing. Listen, Joe. The Fifth was sent here by Ferdias to protect Earth. Sollere-mos will attack—"

"When?" asked Garstang.

"I don't know. Ferdias' agent was supposed to meet me here and give me final orders. Tauncer has taken care of that. Why do you suppose he did that? Why do you suppose he came here and attacked

me? He—"

Garstang turned to Tauncer. "Yes," he said. "Why did you?"

Tauncer said quietly, "You were perfectly right, Garstang. Ferdias has been planning to grab Earth. We knew that, in Orion. We had to know when and how Ferdias would do it—and it was my mission to find out. I was trying, there in the cluster. I tried here, but the Commander was too much on guard."

"You're lying" said Kirk between his teeth. "Not two minutes ago you were telling me I couldn't stop Sollere-mos from taking over Earth. Lyllin, you heard it—"

Lyllin whispered, "I am sorry—but you sent me away from the room. Remember?"

Tauncer turned to the Earthman. "Harper will tell you I'm not lying. You heard every word, didn't you, Harper?"

The Earthman wrinkled his seamy cheeks and said in a tone of ringing honesty, "I sure did."

Kirk was not yet able to stand up and kill him, or Tauncer, so he shut his jaws tight and tried to think. I mustn't be drawn into a verbal slanging match, he thought. That's what Tauncer wants. The more I yell and swear the worse I look. What must I do? Something. Something. . . .

"—so we're going to act sudden-

ly to disarm the Fifth Squadron," Garstang was saying. "Charteris has been suspicious from the first, and what I told him there last night made him more so. And—"

"Disarm the squadron?" cried Kirk. "Are you insane?" He had a sudden nightmare vision of the Orion ships sweeping in, of the cruisers and transports of the Fifth disappearing in a storm of smoke and fire, the men falling like dead leaves.

"We can't take any chances," Garstang said, moving toward the phone. The Earth Navy—"

"Ha!"

"The Earth Navy," repeated Garstang, "is on full alert right now."

"Solleremos will eat it up," said Kirk savagely. "Don't be a fool, Garstang. I don't care how loyal you are to Earth, you've got to admit her navy can't face Orion Squadrons five minutes."

Garstang hesitated. His face was grim and sad, and Kirk felt sorry for him in spite of his anger. Garstang said, "We'll have to do what we can. We'll fight enemies if they come, but we'll make sure first we don't get stabbed in the back."

He picked up the phone. A gleam of satisfaction crossed Tauncer's face. Kirk saw it, and suddenly the inspiration came to him:

HE EXCLAIMED, "I've been an idiot! Listen, Joe—put that phone down. I can prove what I said in three minutes. If I don't—then go ahead and call."

Garstang looked at him, frowning.

Tauncer said, with the first edge of tension his voice had yet shown, "Go ahead, Garstang, don't let him make a fool of you."

Kirk said, "Shut up." He rose and hobbled over to the vera-ray projector. "Help me set this up, Joe. Tauncer used it on Ferdias' agent, and he was going to use it on me. Now let's see what it'll get out of him."

Garstang came over. "A vera-ray? Why didn't you mention it before?"

"I was too damn mad to think straight," said Kirk.

They set it up, and Tauncer watched them, not speaking, yet still the look of apprehension in his eyes was tempered with some underlying confidence. He seemed to be thinking, very hard.

Garstang got the projector going. Harper, the seamy Earthman, winced away from Tauncer as far as he could get. Behind the projector Kirk could not feel anything, but Tauncer's face was briefly agonized, and then it went slack and his eyes lost their keen brilliance, becoming vague and un-

focused.

"Tauncer," said Garstang. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Is Sollereamos planning to take Earth into his Sector?"

Some dim vestige of a censor barrier seemed still to survive in Tauncer's mind, because there was a long delay and Garstang asked the question again, more sharply. But when the answer came it was clear enough.

"Yes."

Kirk looked at Garstang, and Garstang's cheeks reddened. Lyl-lin said triumphantly, "You see?"

"All right," said Garstang, and turned again to Tauncer.

"How will he do it?"

"Direct attack. The Earth naval forces are negligible. Lyra Squadron will be caught on the ground, disorganized by absence of command."

"Absence of command," said Kirk slowly. A sudden alarm came into his face. "You were going to keep me from returning to the squadron."

"Yes."

"But not here at this farm. Too many people knew where I was. Charteris, folk in the town—"

"Oh, no," said Tauncer, "not here. Fast scout. The ship that brought me to Earth ahead of your squadron. It's been waiting

out beyond radar range. It will take us all off."

Now, thought Kirk, I know why he's been so confident. He's been planning for time. "You sent word to the scout ship?"

"Yes," said Tauncer. "On the porto, right after I beamed your house. I was sure you'd be unconscious."

Over Kirk's shoulder, Garstang said sharply, "When will it land?"

Tauncer made a vague movement as though trying to get his arm around where he could see his chrono. Garstang said, "It's exactly two minutes after eleven, Earth time."

Tauncer's lips moved. "Before midnight," he said. "Soon."

He seemed, dazed as he was, to be smiling.

Garstang said to Kirk, "You've got to get out of here, and fast!" He started to turn hurriedly away, as though to hustle him and Lyl-lin out of the house at once, but Kirk said, "No, wait, let me think."

He spoke to Tauncer. "You don't know exactly where Sollereamos squadrons are, or exactly when they'll strike."

"No."

"But there must be a signal, some word they're waiting for."

"Yes," said Tauncer. "When the scout takes us off, that will be the signal. Means we've got Com-

mander. Means Lyra Squadron confused."

Garstang tugged at Kirk. "Come on."

"But," said Kirk to Tauncer, "suppose the scout doesn't find anybody here."

"All the same. They'll know I've failed, and plan may be known. So order will be to strike like lightning before defensive measures taken."

KIRK SHUT off the projector.

He bent over Tauncer. "Get up," he said. "Joel! Give me a hand." They got Tauncer wobbling to his feet. "Put him in the ground car and take him back to Charteris. Try and convince Charteris to let the Fifth go on battle-alert. Every minute may count—if we're caught on the ground, we're sunk."

"Kirk—"

"Don't argue. If anything happens to me, Larned is to take over and cooperate fully with Admiral Laney. You—"

"What do you mean, if anything happens, you're coming too."

"No."

They wrestled Tauncer down the front steps.

"But the scout—"

"That's just it. You heard what he said. The scout must *not* take off again."

"So what are you going to do?"

asked Garstang. "Stand and hold it with your bare hands? We can't possibly get any help from New York in time."

"Yeah," said Kirk. "So I'm going to try to get help right here."

"From these people?"

"Haven't you heard?" said Kirk. "I'm a local boy."

"So if you get it? A bunch of farmers. Even if they'll listen to you, which they probably won't—"

They shoved Tauncer into the car. "Better tie his feet too," said Kirk. "Lyllin! Lyllin, you're going with Joe."

"No," she said from the porch. "I am not."

"But you can't stay here!"

"If you are going, to get yourself killed here, I stay!"

She was determined to make a fight about it, and Kirk had, no time right then. "All right," he said. "I guess you'll be safe enough with the Vinsons." He slammed the door after Garstang. "Get going."

Garstang swore but he roared the ground car out in a cloud of dust and gravel. Kirk ran back into the house. Most of the feeling had come back in his side, and he could move pretty fast. The Earthman, Harper, was squirming around the floor trying to get free. Kirk gave him one ruthless blast with the sono-beam that would put him to sleep for a day or so. He could

be dealt with later, when more important things were out of the way. Then he got on the phone and called Vinson.

A sleepy voice answered. "I was just going to bed. What do you want?"

"When you have an emergency around here," said Kirk, "what do you do to get help in a hurry?"

Vinson's voice waked up. "Why, I phone around fast. The boys turn out quick for fire, flood or whatever. Hey, you got a fire, Commander?"

"Worse," said Kirk. "Do your people have guns of some kind?"

"Sure, nearly every farm has a hunting-shocker. But—"

"Tell 'em to come armed, and come fast. Your place. My wife and I are coming now."

"Say Commander, is this a joke or what?"

"It's the unfunniest joke ever to hit Earth," Kirk said grimly. "Call them!"

He slammed the phone down, grabbed Lyllin by the hand, and lit out, full tilt down the path and into the moonlit road.

BY THE TIME they reached Vinson's house, all the lights were on and Vinson himself was standing in the road, waiting for them.

"I hope you know what you're

doing," he said to Kirk worriedly. "The boys don't like getting hauled out for nothing. What's up?"

Kirk told him, rapidly, between gasps, as he helped Lyllin up on the porch. Mrs. Vinson, a pleasant-looking dark-haired woman in a pink robe, cried out from the doorway and took Lyllin's hand to welcome her in.

"What on earth is going on?" she demanded. "Why, you poor thing, he's run the legs off you! Come in, sit down—" Then she caught sight of Vinson's face. "What is it?" she asked quietly. "Tell me, so I'll know what to do."

"There's going to be a fight," said Vinson, in a wondering, half-incredulous tone. "There's a war going to start, and the first fight is going to be right here, in Orville."

"In the woods," said Kirk hastily, pointing. "You'll be quite safe here. And if we can take them by surprise, there won't even be a skirmish."

"He says that the fate of Earth depends on us," said Vinson, still in that wondering tone. "Well. I'm damned. What do you know?"

A car roared up outside. Another followed it, and then others at irregular intervals. Pretty soon Vinson's yard and porch were crowded with men carrying hunt-

ing-shockers. They looked at Vinson, and at Kirk, curious, doubtful, not exactly hostile but in no mood to be hurried into anything they didn't understand. Kirk glanced up at the sky and groaned. Then he spoke, as rapidly and forcefully as he could.

"So that's the picture," he finished. "If that Orion scout takes off again after it lands, your Earth may be a different place tomorrow. We can stop it—if you will."

He waited. There was no reaction at all for a moment, the leathery faces looking silently at him. Then one man said,

"If people come bothering us, we'll bother them back—plenty. But we don't need any stranger telling us what to do."

Kirk's heart sank. The cursed Earth mulishness was going to defeat him, after all.

Vinson said loudly, "What do you mean, stranger! This is one of the old Orville Kirks. *He's* no stranger. It's strangers that he wants us to help slap down."

They thought that over for a moment, and again Kirk looked up at the sky. It must be very close now. In minutes, maybe, it would drop down, and there would be nothing at all to stop it from going away again and giving the signal. And these stolid farmers...

The one who had spoken peered

bleakly at Kirk, and said, "Well. Like I said, we don't want strangers interfering with us. Do we, boys?"

The men nodded assent, and stalked toward their cars. Kirk turned away, defeated and furious. He'd have to try by himself—

Motors roared to life, and the cars started to go by him. A big red truck paused beside him, and Vinson reached down from it to haul him aboard.

"What are you standin' there for?" he cried to Kirk. "You said it might come any minute!"

Kirk, a little dazedly, scrambled up into the truck beside him. "You mean they're going back with me—"

"What did you think? Like Fred said, no blasted strangers from away outside are going to come sneaking in here!"

The truck roared away down the moonlit road, following the speeding cars back the way Kirk had come, waking hurrying echoes, raising a great cloud of dust to redden the moon.

Kirk thought, "I'll never understand these damned Earthmen—never!"

CHAPTER VIII.

AT THREE minutes and fourteen seconds before midnight

a small, fast spacecraft with the insignie of the striding warrior on her bows dropped down out of the sky and landed in the brush-grown meadow at the edge of the Kirk woods. There was nothing anywhere in sight around it but the dark quiet mass of the trees, the patches of bramble and pale white blossoms of the Queen Anne's Lace. Across the meadow was the Kirk house, with a single lamp burning in it.

A hatch opened and a party of men came out, climbing down a collapsible ladder. There were fifteen of them, armed. They stood still, looking around and listening. Then they began to move toward the house, scrambling and stumbling among the briars and the tufts of bunch-grass, fanned out like skirmishers.

Kirk, lying behind a hazel bush in the fringe of the woods, waved one hand slowly in an outward arc, and there were several small rustlings in the brush to his left. He waited, feeling tense and prickly all over, sweating heavily, though the night was cooler now. He counted, slowly and carefully, moving his lips. Held tight in the crook of his arm was the heavy sono-beam device, snatched up from the house as they came past it. Vinson was beside him, and among the trees nearby were eight

more men, waiting for Kirk's signal. Kirk could not see Vinson's face in the dark, but he could hear his breathing, quick and excited. He leaned his head close to the Earthman's, and whispered,

"Remember, keep down out of the way until you see me go in."

He raised up cautiously.

"All right. Now."

He began to creep rapidly toward the slash of light from the scout-ship's open hatch. The others came behind him. He was not used to this sort of stalking, and he made more noise than the other nine put together. He hoped no one would hear it.

From the direction of the house there came a sudden crackling of shocker-beams. Kirk flung himself forward, over the last few feet. Secrecy was a lost hope now, and all that mattered was getting the sono-beam projector into the open hatchway. The bloody thing weighed a ton when you carried it, but its heft was only relative. Against armor-plate and the strong double-hull of a space-ship it would be no more effective than a bull-roarer.

There was a guard of two in the hatchway. They sprang to the lip of the opening, staring toward the house, their shockers lifted. Kirk yelled, "Get 'em!" Vinson and a man on the other side of him fired

almost together. The guards came tumbling forward onto the ground. Kirk dodged between them and set the sono-projector on the edge of the hatch floor. He had to reach high to do it. The others, following his orders, were hugging the curve of the hull on either side of the ladder. Kirk slammed the stud full charge and wide open.

"They're coming back this way!" yelled Vinson. He was looking toward the house. Kirk craned his neck.

The shocker-flashes flickered like heat-lightning in the night. They moved back toward the ship—probably the fifteen men, or what was left of them, were retreating from the Orville men whom Kirk had stationed in the house and yard.

He said desperately, "Stop them, damn it, can't you stop them?" The sono-beam projector was sliding out of his hands, walking itself with its own vibration across the smooth-worn metal. He had to turn to hold it.

INSIDE the ship there was bedlam going on, a sound of things breaking and men's voices raised in inarticulate cries. A tall gray-haired man with a captain's stars on his shoulder-tabs came at a staggering run into the passage and dropped, and lay still. His

hands quivered with the jarring of the floor.

Kirk shut off the projector and threw it away. He went up the ladder, and at the top he paused a second to look at what was happening in the meadow. The Orville men who had gone in behind the invaders had risen out of the brush. Their shockers flared in a line of ragged light amid the brambles and the white flowers. Then there was darkness and a sudden peace.

"Come on!" Kirk shouted, his voice carrying far across the meadow. Then he ran down the passage, with Vinson and the other eight pounding at his heels. The gray-haired captain did not move as they went by.

And it was almost easy. Seven, eight, nine, of the crew lay sprawled in the main passage or in doorways opening from it, unconscious. The communications man was still making vague pawing motions at his dials, but the motions were only reflex and the equipment was jarred to fragments of splintered glass and plastic. In the small, compact bridge, best protected by intervening bulkheads, the two junior officers and three crewmen were still conscious but too dazed to offer resistance.

"Well," said Vinson, breathing hard, his eyes shining. "We did all

right."

"We did fine," said Kirk, grinning. The other eight grinned, too, nodding their heads at each other and at him. They had fought together and won together, and now they were all comrades, men of Orville, men of Earth. It was a good feeling, Kirk discovered. A very good feeling.

Some of the men came in from the meadow. The fifteen from the scout were all taken. The Orville men had suffered some casualties in the way of burns and shock, but no fatalities.

"Good," said Kirk. He looked at the Orionids. "Where can we put 'em for safekeeping?"

Vinson said, "The local jail is pretty small, but I guess we could pack them in."

"It won't be for long," said Kirk. "The high brass will take them off your hands in a hurry."

"We'll see to it," said Vinson. "I guess you'll want to call New York. And don't worry about the women, I'll stop by the house and let them know we're okay."

"Thanks," said Kirk. He went out across the meadow to the house, and put in his call to Charteris.

After that things happened with desperate speed. A fleet of air-cars descended on Orville and the Kirk house. Charteris was with them. He inspected the Orion scout,

conferred briefly with his aides, and then spoke to Kirk.

"I suppose I should apologize, Commander," he said, rather stiffly, "but I'm not going to. In our position we have no choice but to suspect any force too strong for us to deal with easily."

"I don't care about anything," said Kirk, "except to get my squadron off the ground before Orion strikes."

Charteris nodded. "Your squadron is being fitted for action now. I suggest we return to New York at once to confer with Admiral Laney and decide strategy."

THE NEXT few hours were hectic ones. Orders, preparations, requisitions, arguments. And Kirk found himself up against a totally unexpected stumbling-block—the stiff-necked, stubborn pride of Earth.

"We recognize perfectly," Admiral Laney said frostily, "our position as a fifth-rate naval power, but we have never yet run from battle and we don't intend to start doing it now."

"But against Orion Sector's two crack squadrons—"

"We're grateful for the presence of the Fifth Lyra," said Laney, "but our own ships will bear the brunt of the attack."

"Sir," said Kirk, and he meant

it, "I would be proud to fight under you. But facts are facts. I think you understand that the Fifth Lyra has a certain pride too. But we're not going to bear the brunt of any attack where we know in advance we're outnumbered two to one. In short, 'if you meet Solleremos head on, you meet him alone.'"

"Now here," he went on, turning to the huge depth-chart of the Solar System, "was my thought. We know from the vera-ray examination of the captain of that Orion scout, that the scout's take-off was literally to be the signal for the attack. They didn't dare risk a radio message, even in code, that might be intercepted. So the course of take-off, on the exact coordinates of the hidden fleet, was to serve as a message. They could spot this by ultra-wave scanner, using relays at previously-arranged points in deep space. So, we have the coordinates—"

He wrote them down on the chart.

"Carried to point of convergence, that would put the Orion fleet about there—far off this chart, of course, but roughly south-east of the star Saiph. They will presumably attack along this line—" He drew one, bold and red, a dagger pointed at Earth's heart.

"Roughly nadir-point zero-six, briefly

from our viewpoint," said Laney. "Well?"

"Here," said Kirk, "you seem to have a natural sort of chevaux-de-frise, to borrow an ancient term."

He pointed to a blurred and speckled area lying between Mars and Jupiter.

"The Asteroid Belt," said Laney.

"Yes. We know our way around in it, but anyone else would find it hard going." His eyes brightened. "Plenty of places for ambush. Yes, I see what you're driving at. If we could entangle their superior forces in the drift—"

"Exactly. Bait them in there, harry them all you can. Now, then. They'll be expecting to catch the Fifth Lyra on the ground. As far as they know, Tauncer succeeded and all is well. So perhaps they won't be too watchful. We'll be up here hiding above the Sun, screened by it from their radar. When you have them hooked—"

He made a downward slashing motion with his hand.

"That suits me," said Laney. He shook hands with Kirk solemnly. Then he turned to Charteris and the others who were gathered with anxious faces in the conference room. "I think we may as well get started."

Charteris sighed. He picked up the intercom and spoke into it

NORTHWARD, the fields around Orville were brightening with a new day. In the meadow behind the Kirk house the briars and the Queen Anne's Lace were beaten down by the passage of men and trucks. They were all gone now except for one truck with massive electronic equipment, pulled back to a safe distance from the Orion scout. The necessary changes had been made in the ship's control system. Now the crew of the truck waited for a signal from the house.

It came.

The truck crew went to work, activating the remote-control relays, setting up a locked-in series of coordinates. Then the firing key was pressed.

With every semblance of life, the Orion scout took off on its destined course—a Judas goat, empty and silent, with no living thing inside its hull.

Standing on the steps of the Vinson's house, Lyllin watched it rise and vanish in the blue air. She had had one short call from Kirk. *Wait there. I'll come back.* Now the small dying thunder of the scout-ship's flight seemed like the receding footsteps of everything she had ever loved, passing over the distant hills.

She turned slowly and went back into the house.

CHAPTER IX

THE SKY screamed light, beneath them. The Sun, its atoms ceaselessly riven and then reborn, shrieked raving energy, magnetism, electricity, light, radiant heat, a rage across the heavens, a cosmic storm flinging up wild plumes and spindrift of violet calcium, of yellow sodium, of blue and red and purple.

Over it, as over a limitless fiery ocean, hung the shoal of silver ships. Tossed and twitched by storms of radiation, wrenched by the mighty claws of the titan magnetic field, scorched by the blaze of the star, they fought to hold position. Their formation wavered, sagged, re-formed and wavered again, and still they held together.

On the bridge of the *Starsong*, clutching a stanchion as the deck heeled and shuddered under him, Kirk stood with Garstang watching the screens.

"Not a sign!" said Garstang in his ear. "And we can't sit up here forever!"

The rim of the Asteroid Belt showed on one screen, a jagged wheeling of rock fragments, dust and pebbles and little naked worlds, black on their shadow-sides flashing like heliographs where they caught the light. Beyond them was space, very deep, very dark,

very empty, looking toward Orion and his pendant sword.

In that deep emptiness out there, five ships moved slowly. Earth ships, behaving like a normal patrol. The remainder of Earth's fleet was hidden among the asteroids. Even the searching rays that fed the screen could not see them.

Suddenly Garstang caught Kirk's shoulder. "There!" he said. He leaned forward and pointed his blunt forefinger at the screen.

Out of the depths toward the star Saiph came a swarm of tiny flecks that might have been nothing more than bits of cosmic drift, except that they moved together and very fast. They swept in toward the Solar System with a gathering rush, growing, picking up the sunlight on their polished sides. Two full squadrons of Solleremos' fleet, on planetary approach.

The five Earth ships out there wheeled in perfect formation and went on out to meet them.

Kirk's mouth was dry. Runnels of sweat crept down his temples, down his body. The palms of his hands were clammy.

"Screen's gone again," he said; and swore.

The screens blazed useless white, even the powerful rays that served them wrenched and cut by an outburst of solar electricity. Then

they cleared again.

The Earth ships had not gone far out. Suddenly they wheeled again, abandoning formation now. spurts of light came from their launching tubes in quick rotation, each ship firing as she bore on the target. Then they cracked on speed and ran for the Belt.

One of the Orionid cruisers burst into a great flame and was gone.

Garstang shouted, and as though at a signal the screen went out again.

Kirk ran his uniform sleeve over his face, and kept still. There were so few of the Earth ships, and so many of the others, something more than double the strength of his own squadron. Far below, Earth lay naked, stripped, utterly without defense. Kirk thought of Lyllin, and the Vinson house with the dusty road in front of it. He thought of the woods and the meadow where they had fought in the night, and curiously enough he thought of the cat. Insolent little beast

He waited for the screen to clear, and watched.

A number of Orion ships detached themselves from the main fleet and raced after the Earth ships. They were much faster. The long arm of Solleremos was reaching swiftly now, and one of the Earth cruisers winked out with a

brave, brief burst of flame. The other four reached the Belt.

The Orionids plunged in after them.

"Now," whispered Garstang. "Now, now—"

THE EIGHT Orionid cruisers, apparently detailed to mop up this patrol, sped down a deceptively open "lead" through the asteroid drift. The scanner beams swung to a better angle to follow them, and now the screen showed a closer view of that stony wilderness. The Earth ships had vanished. The lead pinched out in a cul-de-sac of wildly gyrating rocks. The Orion cruisers did a fast-about, practically on each others' heels, but before they were finished the four Earth ships and half a dozen others appeared from nowhere, all around them.

"Hit them," muttered Garstang. "Oh, hell, get onto it and *hit* them!"

They hit them. There was a quick holocaust of light-bursts and the Orionid cruisers in there were gone.

"That hurt them," said Garstang. "They're hooked—"

He turned and looked at Kirk. Kirk lifted his hand, his body bent slightly forward, his eyes intent upon the screen.

Out there in the Asteroid Belt, the trap was sprung. And now the

Orionids knew they had the whole Earth fleet, such as it was, to deal with—a force too small to stop them, but too formidable to leave on their flank and rear. The squadrons altered course, curving in a long bow-shaped line toward the Earth ships that hovered, in apparent doubt, above the fringes of the drift.

Kirk brought his hand down in a slashing gesture. "*Now!*"

The Fifth Lyra swooped out of the sun.

Now.

Now is the moment, the one right time, there will not be another. Either you make it or you don't. Outnumbered, outmanned, and outgunned the element of surprise is all you've got.

The Sun falls behind, the edge of the Belt shifts and tilts and swings as you cut the plane of the ecliptic. Out of the furnace into the fire, at full drive.

The long line of the Orion ships is very beautiful, strung against the glittering emptiness of space.

The *Starsong* groans and quivers like a living thing. You can hear the beating of her heart, the pounding throb of power pushed to the limit, and beyond. Garstang, in the captain's place, has a face of iron, dark and still. Sweat shines on the edges of it. The men are quiet.

The Commander is afraid.

Ships, lives, men, a planet. Who would say *Now!* and not be afraid?

The Orion fleet springs at the viewports. The ships grow large, the intervals between them widen out. The *Starsong* flies at the point of a wedge shaped like an axe-blade. Behind her, on either side, the squadron follows in close formation.

In a tight, flat voice, the Commander says, "Prepare to engage."

The Fifth Lyra, the falling wedge, the axe-blade, hits the line of cruisers from above and cuts it in two.

Instantly the close-held wings fan out, driving the severed sections apart, opening the gap so wide it can never be closed again. Shells burst, little blinding suns, little fountains of hell-fire, racking the ships, burning them, destroying them. But the wings sweep on. Part of the Orionid line is rolled up and driven into the drift of the Belt, where the Earth ships strike and strike again, and the proud cruisers with the polished sides become wreck and flotsam to join the cosmic debris in its endless journey around the Sun. The other section is driven outward into space, back toward Orion.

And the *Starsong* hunts down the *Betelgeuse*, flagship of Solleremos' fleet.

Kirk says, If we can get her

I think the rest will all go home.
Fire One—

Fire Two.

The *Betelgeuse* answers, and space is drowned in a flaming cloud. The *Starsong* staggers and men are thrown down on the reeling iron deck. A red light flares on the telltale board. Somewhere deep in the ship's vitals the bulkhead doors slam shut, sealing off. The *Starsong* has a hole in her and some men have died, but she's still alive, still strong to move and strike.

Fire Three.

The *Betelgeuse* dives clear and her own tubes spout hellfire, a double flowering of death and destruction. The *Starsong* wrenches away, desperate, shaken, and once more the ports are filled with fire and a red light glimmers on the board.

Fire Four.

The *Betelgeuse* quivers strangely. With a dreamlike slowness two pieces of her appear out of the brilliance and the flame, bow and stern at odds with each other, going different ways. Then there is a white blinding flash, and she is gone.

And the Orion fleet, leaderless, surprised, mauled and clawed and wounded, is pulling out. One by one, in pairs, in little groups, they turn tail and streak for open space,

and are gone.

The Fifth Lyra and the ships of Earth follow them, but not far. Space is empty, and in the ships there is a great silence, while the men breathe softly and look at nothing and feel that they are still alive. There is no light now but the light of the Sun and the distant stars. The Belt wheels on its way, and bits of riven metal that once were ships fall slowly toward it.

AFTER A TIME, on the bridge of the *Starsong*, Garstang turned to Kirk. His face was sweating and wild, and his eyes had a dazed look. He said, "What now?"

"We wait and see what," said Kirk. "Maybe nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Solleremos has missed his spring. I've an idea he may prefer to make like it all never happened, if we don't give any official news of this fight. I think Charteris will see it that way."

Charteris did. The battle couldn't be kept secret really, but Earth's authorities pretended that it had never happened. There was no profit in starting a full-fledged war, and there wouldn't be one if Solleremos had learned his lesson.

He had learned it, it seemed. From Orion there was a long

silence. Then came a routine congratulation on the Commemoration. The Governor of Orion Sector, it appeared, was happy for Earth.

"The so-and-so must be raging, but he won't try *that* again," said Kirk.

To him, and to the Squadron, had come another message, from Ferdias. Well done. That was all. But from Ferdias, it was plenty.

And the Commemoration blazed, on Earth. The lights, the bands, the speeches, and then the fly-over—the battered mighty giants of the Fifth roaring across the sky with the even more battered Earth cruisers leading the way.

From its museum they had brought the first of all the space-ships, and everyone held their breath and kept fingers crossed while it lurched, coughed and wobbled up into the sky, and labored bravely around the planet, and by some miracle came down safe again.

And the great day was over.

Garstang, looking strange now in the black uniform of Earth, spoke earnestly to Kirk the day before the Fifth was to leave.

"You know you're pretty much a hero here now, Kirk. You'll be retiring from service in not too many years. Why don't you come back to Earth to live?"

"Why does everyone say, come

back to Earth," Kirk complained. "Just because I had ancestors here I'm no Earthman!"

He added, "And whatever you do, don't mention that bright idea to Eyllin! I'm going up to Orville now to get her."

Garstang only smiled at him, a queer sort of smile.

Kirk drove up through the quiet roads, the green countryside. The golden sun was soft upon his face. The breeze held a faint, smoky-tang of oncoming fall. Earth's fall—he'd heard about that.

Peaceful, beautiful—but it was no world for him! Come "back" to Earth, indeed! Why, he'd lived on many worlds and none of them had ever got that kind of sentimental hold on him. Though he could understand why people felt that way about this old place—

Hell, he must be getting sentimental himself! He put a curb on such thoughts and drove on. And when he drove into Orville, there were frantic handwavings from every street-corner, his name was shouted by the kids along the sidewalks.

VINSON came running out of his house to meet him when he pulled up.

"Your wife's over at your house," Vinson explained. He shook hands. He was vastly excited and

proud. "You know what—the village is going to put up a plaque. With all our names on it. Just saying, 'They fought the Battle of Orville'. Nothing else, account of diplomacy."

Kirk said, "It deserves the plaque, that fight. If you chaps hadn't turned out that night—"

"Hear, you're leaving tomorrow," Vinson went on. "Thought I'd keep your old place going better, while you're gone, by working the fields. I'll keep an eye on your house, too."

Kirk said, "What makes you think I'm coming back?"

Vinson said, puzzledly, "Why, you are, aren't you? I mean—you're an Orville boy—this is your real home—"

Kirk suppressed the impatient words he'd been about to utter. No use upsetting a nice guy. He said, "Oh, sure, I'll be back—"

He drove on to the old house. Eyllin sat on the porch. He saw, to his surprise, that on her lap there cozily reclined a large black cat.

Eyllin smiled. "I think I've been accepted. By the people here—and by Tom."

Tom yawned and looked with insolent green eyes at Kirk. "His sides are bulging," Kirk said. "You've been bribing the beggar with food."

She laughed. "I don't know how he'll like space-travel. But we'll be bringing him back some day."

"Will we?" said Kirk.

She looked up at him. "Joe Garstang was talking to me. You *will* be retiring from active service in a few years. And I like it here now, Kirk. I really do."

He said, loudly, "Why in the world must everyone assume that I *want* to come back to this place? Will you tell me that?"

"Don't you?"

He started to answer, then didn't. He looked out from the porch of the old house, at the sunset light sweeping the green valley, at the

old trees beyond the fields, at everything that had somehow got a queer grip on him without his knowing it.

He said, "Well, I don't know. Maybe."

Lyllin smiled.

That night the Fifth went skyward in a great thundering that rolled louder and louder across the cities and the countryside. Great black bulks flying up fast across the glittering sky, roaring, bellowing, shouting a gigantic farewell down to the watching millions as they rushed out toward the stars.

THE END

★ "I - C - B - M" ★

THOSE ominous initials are going to have a familiar ring before many months are past. In a matter of fact way the Government has announced that the crash program inaugurated only a few years ago, is about to be completed. The INTERCONTINENTAL BALLISTICS MISSILE is here!—almost. Unfortunately in the same breath, it was said the Soviets also are succeeding in developing a similar device.

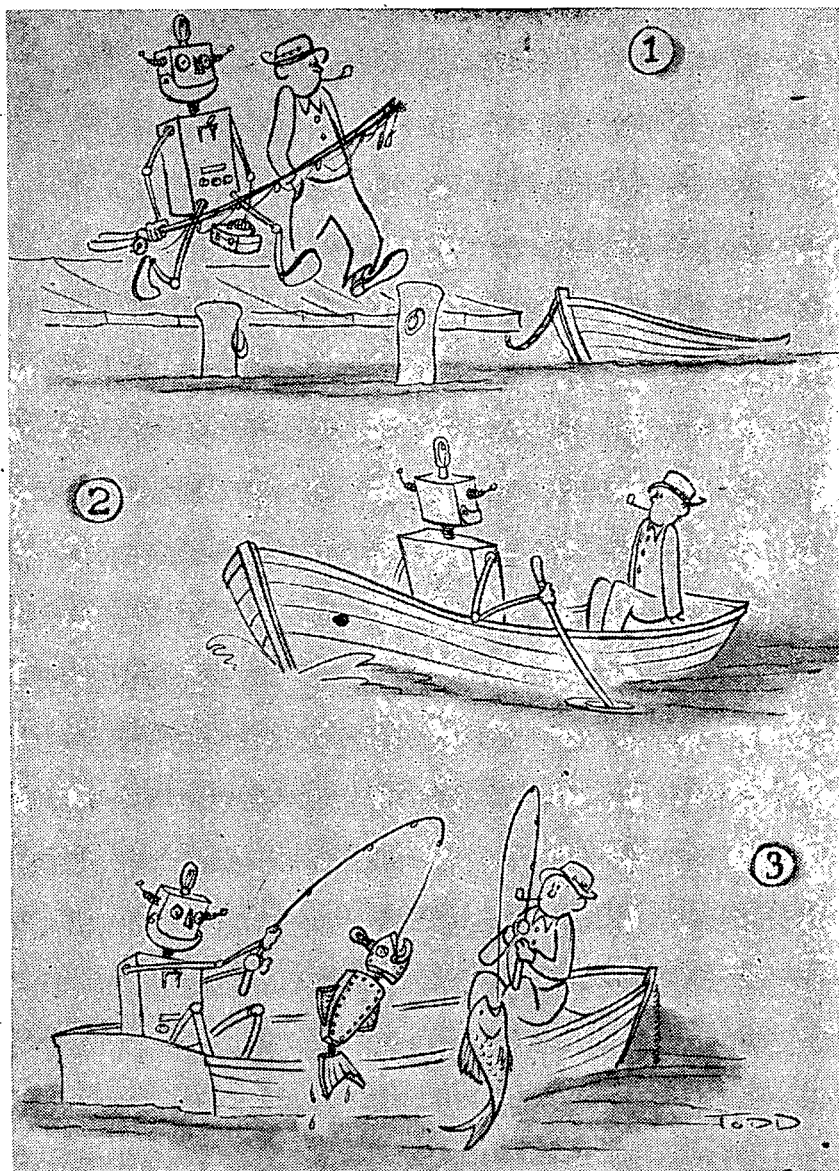
The ICBM is a separate entity in itself—it is not a "guided missile". It is the big brother of the V-2, a tremendous rocket with a range of three thousand miles, an atomic warhead, and once it is launched, nothing on this Earth can stop its

arrival at its destination. The only guidance it receives are initial forces which determine its trajectory. No radars can confuse it, no guided missiles can touch it. It is a gigantic Thor's hammer.

A decade ago, this was fantasy—today it is almost reality. The ICBM is the real deterrent to war, for there is no answer to it, especially if it can be launched in numbers—as it can.

Perhaps that is an exaggeration; undoubtedly some type of counter missile will combat it, but the defense rarely equals the attack.

The hope for Men lies in that it is the big step toward interplanetary space. How near to a space ship it must be in design!



You meet a lot of screwy people when you do police work. Like the guy who popped up in a murder job. Offered to solve the case with —

Dalrymple's Equation

by

Paul W. Fairman

Illustrated by W. E. Terry

IT'S THE not knowing that gets you. The wondering. Thinking sometimes one way and sometimes the other. But never knowing for sure. Being suckered is bad enough but *wondering* whether you've been suckered is rougher. Or whether you've let the biggest thing since fingerprints slide right by you.

Someday the case may be solved. Then we'll know for sure—one way or the other—Donovan and I. What case? Wait 'til I tell you. It won't take long.

The thing started with as crazy a murder as two Homicide cops ever got called in on: In a bar on Tenth Avenue near Grand—you probably know the place and you probably read about the case. It was in all the papers. But the whole story never saw print.

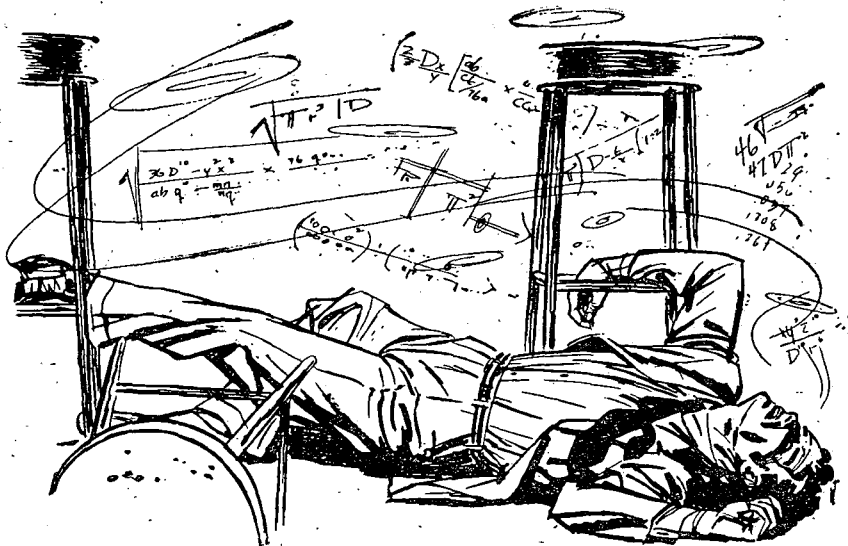
We were rung into it by a call from the squad car boys who got there first. We walked in and a cop I didn't know pointed a thumb at a young guy lying with his head on the bar and said, "Deader than a lamp post for my money."

A young lad—around twenty-three or four—lying there as though he'd had one too many and was sleeping it off. He *had* downed one too many. And he would spend all eternity sleeping it off.

He was all through.

The barkeep stood there with his apron hanging out and a baffled look on his face. A look that had all the earmarks of being genuine. I said, "Kennedy—Homicide. What happened?"

The barkeep shrugged and licked his dry lips. "I dunno. He just keeled over. I got scared and called



the cops.”

The kid certainly looked like a morgue job, as I said, but we don’t take things like that for granted. The squad car boys had called General Hospital and now a couple of internes came in with a respirator. They didn’t use it, though. One of them put his nose close down to the kid’s mouth and then looked at the barkeep. “You served him a drink?”

The barkeep nodded. “That’s what he came in for.”

“Let’s see the bottle.”

The barkeep gave that a little thought and then took a bottle off the rack and pushed it over the

bar. The interne sniffed it, made a face and said, “There’s enough arsenic in there to depopulate New Jersey.”

“Arsenic!” the barkeep croaked. “You’re crazy! We don’t serve nobody nō arsenic here!”

The interne looked at Donovan and me and said. “Call your meat wagon, lads. This one is beyond us.”

He had identification—an Arthur Davis, with nothing at all sinister in his wallet. The lab men came and there was a lot of activity for an hour or so and then we padlocked the joint and took the barkeep downtown with us. His on-the-spot story was simple. Davis had

come in and ordered a drink. The barkeep served it up. Davis knocked it off. The drink, in turn, knocked Davis off.

The barkeep's name was Timothy Garver. He was a middle-aged cork puller who had been in the business most of his life. We ran him through R and I and found him clean. Then we sat him down in the interrogation room and started digging into him.

"What did you have against Davis?"

Garver looked like a flabby-jowled ghost. His hands shook. "Nothing. So help me. I never seen the guy before."

"You think we'll swallow that?" Donovan asked. "You think you're playing with school kids? Telling us you poison a guy you never saw before?"

I said, "Maybe he did it for laughs."

"I didn't poison him!" Garver pleaded. "You got to believe me!"

"You mean there wasn't any poison in that bottle?"

"Sure there was—if you say so. What I mean is I didn't put it there. I didn't know it was there. I—"

"What you mean is you'd planned to get the guy out into the alley after he was dead and you lost your nerve after he keeled over."

"No—no! Nothing like that."

"You had that bottle spiked, waiting for Davis to come in."

"No—no! It was just an ordinary bar bottle."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Every tavern has a brand of whisky they push—their bar whisky. When a customer isn't particular about his brand we give him the bar liquor."

It seemed to me the guy was gaining courage. He wasn't quite as nervous as he'd been. "You served other people out of that same bottle?" I asked.

He licked his lips and dropped his eyes before he answered. "Sure I did."

"But that was before you put the arsenic in it."

"I didn't put any poison in that bottle. And you guys can't pin this on me!"

"What makes you think we can't?"

"Because I never knew the fellow and you can't prove I did. So how are you going to make anybody believe I killed somebody I didn't know and had nothing against. You think I'm nuts or something?"

"It's a possibility," I said.

DONOVAN narrowed his eyes at Garver and said, "You're

holding something back. Come on! Out with it."

Again that guilty look as Garver shook his head. But you can't send a guilty look to the chair and it seemed Garver had us stymied. At least for a while. We juggled him on suspicion but we knew unless we got something else to strengthen the case we wouldn't get an indictment against him. There just wasn't enough.

Donovan and I chewed it over with the Captain and he couldn't give us any help except the advice to keep plugging. We told him we'd try to come up with something and went on back to the tavern.

The owner had been there and gone and we still had a patrolman stationed in front. Donovan unlocked the door and released the patrolman for his regular beat and we went inside.

It was very quiet. Naturally. Nothing is quieter in this world than an empty bar. I said, "Well, where do we start?"

Donovan shrugged. "You got me. And you know damn well nothing's going to happen on this case until it breaks from the outside."

"That's right." What he meant was a new angle coming from a stoolie. Or something opening up while we investigated Davis' background or Garver's.

But something new was added right there in the tavern. Very suddenly. A guy popped up from behind the bar and said, "Hello."

We whirled around and looked at him and Donovan snorted, "Who the hell are you?"

"My name is Tennyson Dalrymple."

"What kind of a label is that?" The man came around from behind the bar. "I liked it—I took it. If it annoys you I'm sorry." But you could tell by the sneer on his face that he wasn't sorry at all.

He was a medium-sized unattractive figure of a man and yet you couldn't put your finger on just where the unattractiveness came from. He wasn't good looking but neither was he repulsive. He didn't have a superman's frame but neither was he a cripple nor a malformed freak. There was just something about him you took an instant dislike to and the dislike stayed with you.

And Dalrymple seemed to enjoy increasing the antagonism. He wore a habitual sneer and his voice had a cutting quality to it.

I said, "What the hell are you doing in here?"

"Going about my business."

"Entrance is prohibited. There was a policeman in front. The door was locked."

"There's a back door."

"That was locked too."

"Locks are silly things. Any fool should be able to handle such feeble devices."

Donovan was snarling. "Look, brother. You're talking yourself right into trouble. Now tell us what you're doing here and tell it quick."

"Reading the gas meter."

"Why?"

"Why would anyone read a gas meter? I work for the gas company. This place is on my route."

"I think you're lying."

"It will be easy enough to find out."

"Well find out at headquarters."

"You're taking me in?"

"What do you think?"

Dalrymple certainly wasn't afraid of cops. He shook his head in disgust and said, "This is certainly a stupid world you live in. A world of idiots. Really it is."

Normally I'm pretty easy going but this punk with his talent for rubbing people the wrong way, just plain got me. "If you're so damn smart why are you reading meters for the gas company?"

He grinned and his grin said he was happy at getting a rise out of me. "I just arrived recently. The job will do until I get around to what I'm planning."

DONOVAN vented his hostility by hauling the guy out to the car. Dalrymple made no resistance but Donovan managed to get mildly rough regardless. This also seemed to make the little intruder happy. As though he took the roughness as a sign he'd got under Donovan's skin too. Which he had.

He threw a few insults at us while we rode to headquarters but we held in, knowing if we gave ourselves an inch we'd take a mile and slug him and have it over with.

In the interrogation room we went at him with all the fixings. A strong light in his eyes—cigarette smoke in his face.

Donovan, with a snarl on his puss said, "All right, buster. Let's cut out the jokes. What were you doing in that tavern?"

"Reading the gas meter."

"I said cut out the jokes."

"You've got my identification. What makes you think I had any other reason for going there?"

"I'll ask the questions. Maybe you don't realize what a spot you're in."

"This is idiotic. This whole procedure emanates from your personal dislike of me. All you have to do is call the company."

"What do you know about the Davis killing?"

"Only what I heard in the neigh-

borhood. Intriguing little equation, isn't it?"

I think we'd realized from the beginning that we had nothing on Dalrymple and that we wouldn't be able to involve him. He'd hit it on the nose when he said our motivation was personal dislike. Finally I went out and called the gas company, realizing we'd delayed doing this because we knew it would lose Dalrymple for us.

When I went back and told Donovan, he still hated to let go. "You know," he told the sneering little meter-reader, "we can still throw you in the can."

"What for?"

"Trespassing, Breaking and entering."

"Oh, yes. But you won't."

"And why not?"

"Because it would be too small a triumph and you know you would be acting from spite. It would diminish your stature in your own eyes."

Donovan was trying to swallow his helpless wrath when I remembered something Dalrymple had said. "Listen, punk. Exactly where did you come from?"

"That's right. You made some funny cracks. You said, to quote, 'This is certainly a stupid world you live in. A world of idiots.' You also said, 'I've just arrived recent-

ly.' Now it occurs to me—"

"That I might have come from a place beyond this planet you call Earth?"

"No. That you're a crackpot — a psycho — and maybe we'd better hold you."

He sneered at me and ticked off his replies on his fingers. "I did come from a world far away from yours. I'm not a crackpot — not a psycho. And you will not hold me."

I looked at Donovan. Donovan looked at me. His voice gentled into a tone of soft contempt.

"Just where *do* you come from, punk?"

"From Arva Majoris and don't bother looking it up. It's a planet in a galaxy beyond the conception of your most brilliant minds. And I use the term *brilliant* very loosely."

"And how did you get here?"

"You couldn't possibly understand if I told you. Your elemental mind simply couldn't grasp the mathematical accident that brought me here; nor the ten-million-to-one chance of it ever happening again."

Donovan grinned in anticipation. "And you actually think we aren't going to turn you over to Psycho?"

"Of course you're not."

"And for what reason will we refrain from such?"

"Because if you do that, you'll never get your stupid little murder solved."

I found myself poised and ready to pounce. "Then you *have* been holding out."

"If you mean do I know who killed Davis — no. If you mean can I find out—yes."

"Well, well," Donovan growled. "He's a detective too."

Dalrymple split a sneer between us. "It's nothing but a mathematical problem. In the world I come from, students corresponding to your first-graders are started out on far harder equations."

"So you can just take a pencil and figure it out, eh?"

"Certainly."

I'VE TRIED to remember since, exactly what my reaction to Dalrymple was at that time. Hatred transcended any other emotion I may have had. But there was something else. A feeling of almost personal discomfort springing from the certainty that he wanted us to hate him, or at least didn't care whether or not we did. This was a part of my reaction. And wondering why, also.

There was an element of vague fear, too, and of this I'm sure —

a vague senseless conviction this crackpot could do all he claimed he could.

I remember that when this last came to my conscious mind, I rejected it with indignation. And I knew Donovan was rejecting something too. He turned from Dalrymple with a sneer and said, "We haven't got time to fool with psychos. We've got a murder to solve. Kick this guy out and let the white coats find him all over again."

I was sneering too. I took out a pencil and threw it at him and said, "All right, wise guy. There's one. Let's see what you can do."

"Have you got a piece of paper?"

Almost savagely, Donovan ripped a page off the calendar. It was blank on the back. He threw it on the table and all the time I could see his eyes. They were asking, *Why in the hell am I doing this?* and trying to cover the question by showing contempt.

We glanced swiftly at each other and there was guilt in both our faces; like two realists meeting outside a fortune teller's tent. Then Dalrymple took over.

"We have certain facts," he began. "A dead man; the person who admits he went through the physical motions of killing him. We also have the method of producing

death — poison — and the setting of the crime."

"I think we've had enough of this clowning," Donovan said in a husky voice.

Dalrymple ignored the interruption, not even bothering to sneer at Donovan. "As every school child on my planet knows, each of these facts must be given a symbol and must become a part of our exploratory equation."

I was a little rusty on such things but it sounded to me about the same way school children on our planet went about solving problems in algebra. I didn't say anything though.

Dalrymple had the pencil racing over the paper, laying out a series of weird symbols the like of which I had never seen. They were neither numbers nor letters; nor the kind of geometric or algebra symbols used on earth either. Of that I was sure.

The closest I can come is to compare them to Egyptian hieroglyphics and yet that's far from the mark. But whatever they were, Dalrymple seemed to know exactly what he was doing.

After a few minutes, he leaned back and said, "There — the exploratory equation is complete. Now we search it for flaws."

Donovan and I had got inter-

ested to the point that hostilities were temporarily suspended. Donovan asked, "Search what for which flaws."

"You haven't the mental scope to understand even the basics of what I'm doing, but maybe you can understand this: There is no such thing as chance in a civilization or a culture which is properly based upon mathematics. In such a civilization lies and evasions are unheard of because all action and motivation past, present, or future, can be evaluated and revealed in complete exactitude."

WE WERE trying to follow along. I said, "We've got things like that. Robot brains, we call them. They figure out impossible problems."

And it came to me at that moment how we were taking for granted, through our conversation, our statements, and even our thinking, that this Dalrymple was exactly what he'd said he was — a man from another world.

He said, "I know what you refer to, but they are so childishly conceived as to be almost useless." The old sneer again.

Donovan growled. "You talk a lot but you haven't proved a damn thing."

"On the contrary. The flaws in

this equation stand out by themselves. For instance, our *zong* is implicated but must obviously be supplemented in order to balance the *terz* shading of the exploratory equation."

"Are you kidding?" Donovan rasped.

"I'll forego technical terms and translate into realities you can grasp. It amounts to this: The bartender poured the actual poison into the glass, but all unknowing. However, as a dominant factor of the equation he must be further developed along the lines of secondary motivation. In other words, a completely unrelated motivation on his part cleared the way for the crime."

Dalrymple's fingers were flying. More of the weird symbols were appearing. "The motivation for the weight he bears in the case is made up of two characteristics—habit and greed."

"And where does that get us?" I asked.

"It reveals the fact that the bartender poured the poison into the bottle. But without knowledge that it was poison nor with malicious intent."

"That's impossible!" I said.

"Not at all. The whole sequence becomes clear when we strive to complete our equational balance

in the first phase. The bartender poured an unconsumed drink back into the bottle after whoever ordered it walked out without drinking it."

Of course! The logic of it hit Donovan and me at the same moment. Donovan said, "How in the hell did you ever think of that?"

He meant it as a compliment but Dalrymple did not take it as such. "I didn't think of it, you fool. I worked it out. Haven't you understood anything I've told you? It's all here in the progression of the equation. Incidentally, that factor is the pivot of the whole sequence. Your stupid logic should carry you on from there."

"Somebody was trying to poison somebody else!" Donovan said.

"There had to be two men," I added. "They came in and ordered drinks. One poured poison in the other's drink. Then they left without—"

Dalrymple was leering at me. "How about one man and— suicide?"

I swore at myself inwardly for giving him the opening. But he turned back to his symbols and said, "By sheer blundering chance you hit it, though. It was two men and attempted murder."

Donovan wasn't having much to say. Dalrymple threw down the

pencil. "I'll be going now. I have more important things to do."

"Can you give us the names of the two men?" I asked, and again swore at myself for being over-eager.

Dalrymple gave me a long, disgusted clinical look. "I can, but I won't. It would take another hour to round out the equation and I don't feel like doing all your work for you. If you can't take what I've given you and tie up the case, then you'd better both resign."

He got up and started to leave. At the door, he turned. "I live at the Crestwood Hotel if you want to get in touch with me again." He sneered. "Maybe you'll need help some day in tying your shoes."

He left. Neither Donovan nor I made any attempt to stop him. After a long minute Donovan said, "We can't let him go. He's involved in that killing. He's got to be. How else would he know?"

"Are you sure he's involved?"

Donovan didn't answer. He picked up the pencil and snapped it in two with a savage gesture. "The sneering little son-of-a—"

"Besides, we've got no proof he was right in anything he said."

"Let's go find out."

We found out. It didn't take long and we got a citation. We hit Gar-

ver with one question—"Who was in the bar just before Davis entered?" and he collapsed right in our laps. We got all he knew and it wasn't hard to trace down two guys named Kinder and Walpole.

They were both drunk when they came in and Walpole had some arsenic with him he was going to make a bug spray with. He got sore at Kinder for some drunken reason and poured some of the stuff into his drink while Kinder was in the washroom. Then something pulled them back into the street before they had their drinks. Garver heard metal grind and thought that was probably it. Once outside, they probably forgot what tavern they'd been in because they didn't return.

Garver was glad to get rid of them. He hadn't seen the poison-pouring bit and dumped the shots into the bottle. When Davis keeled over as a result of the next shot out of the bottle, Garver was scared. He could lose his job and his boss could have lost his license for serving drunks and for pouring the whiskey back.

So that was the case. A tragic incident, with Walpole not even remembering what he'd done. And with Davis dead.

WE WOULD have been better off leaving it there—

charging Dalrymple off as a crackpot who had made a lucky guess and taking the credit for breaking the case. We *did* take the credit, but it was hard to believe, once he'd gone, that Dalrymple was actually for real. So one afternoon a couple of weeks later we were passing the Crestwood Hotel. Donovan braked the car and squinted at the building.

"This is where he said he lived."

I knew who Donovan meant.
"Uh-huh."

"Let's go up."

"Why not?"

We went in and got the room number from the clerk and went on up. We knocked. Dalrymple opened the door. He hadn't changed a bit. There was a sneer on his face, hostility in his voice when he said, "Ha—the police force. What happened? Somebody steal your squad car?"

He turned around before we could answer and went back into the room. We followed him and stood there looking at the layout. He had a big table in the middle of the floor and there was a huge sheet of paper on it. The sheet was almost completely covered with the funny symbols he'd used in solving the bar poisoning. Or had he solved it?

Anyhow, he went back to his

work as though we hadn't even come—adding more symbols along one edge—and finally Donovan asked, "What in the hell are you doing?"

Dalrymple looked up as though annoyed at being disturbed. "I'm arranging to stay on your planet. I like it herē."

"But what's all that got to do with staying?"

"I have to have money. The way things are done here, money is vitally necessary."

"How are you going to get it?"

Dalrymple looked up and his sneer brightened. "I'm going to steal it."

Donovan and I looked at each other in a kind of double-take. Then I said, "I don't suppose you'd care to tell us how and where you're going to do the stealing?"

"I won't tell you how—that would be silly. I don't mind telling you where." He put down another symbol.

"All right—where?"

"I'm not quite sure yet. Chicago, or New York, or Pittsburgh, or . . . This is the master plan: I've almost finished. It involves the principals—the method of operation. There is much more to be done of course. Assistants will have to be approached, analyzed ma-

thematically as to capabilities—”

“How much money are you thinking of stealing?”

“I figure I’ll need about five million,” Dalrymple said calmly.

Donavan and I looked at each other again and our eyes asked the questions. What should we do about this? Haul the guy in and get laughed at? Or did we have a right to haul him in if we wanted to? Just call him a crackpot and let it go at that?

Sure. It was the obvious thing to do. And the easiest. Why stick our necks out. And at that moment I saw Dalrymple smile ever so slightly as though he knew exactly what was going on in our minds—had made allowances for it on his damned chart.

Donovan shrugged. “Let’s get away from this creep,” he said.

We turned and walked out.

AND WE never saw Dalrymple again. In fact I’d practically forgotten about him, when a year later—the date was January 17, 1951 — I came back to the squadroom late in the afternoon and there was a paper lying on the desk Donovan and I used. Its headline read:

STICKUP MEN GET SEVEN MILLION IN BOSTON

And the story went on to tell

of the now famous Brinks holdup in that city; a holdup that had not been solved to this day; a seemingly perfect crime.

Still nothing for me to get excited about. Not until I saw the letter that had been lying under the paper. It was addressed to both Donovan and me — the names and destination printed in lead pencil. There was no return address. I tore it open. A white card fell out. On the card was printed two words—nothing else. The words read:

—OR BOSTON.

SO THAT’S where we sit now. Almost seven years ago that stickup occurred. For seven years Donovan and I had waited for the law to crack it so we could quit wondering; so we could tell ourselves that Dalrymple was just another screwball.

But the statute of limitations nearly ran out on the great Brinks robbery and now we’re beginning to wonder if it really was solved. Wondering if we could have stopped it by stopping Dalrymple, the brain behind it all.

Wondering if he really was a man from another — oh hell! It just couldn’t be!

Or could it?

THE END

All his life he had been searching for the big strike. But always he had failed. Now he had come to Mars—his last chance. This had to be—

Gunnison's Bonanza

by

Dick Purcell

Illustrated by Lloyd Rognan

THAT'S damned expensive," Gunnison said.

The pilot grinned. "A man wanting to be set down by the Ghanati should expect to pay high." The pilot had a battered old ship, a forged license, a questionable bill of sale. He trafficked only in desperate trips for desperate people and he knew Gunnison would pay the price.

Scowling, Gunnison counted out the highbidding tribute from a leather sack containing the coins of all the planets: Terran gold eagles, Venusian phalada, Mercurian scoz.

The pilot inspected each coin; bagged the total, "When can you have your gear aboard?"

"In twenty minutes."

"We'll leave at sunset," the pilot said. "Before the moons lift."

Gunnison stowed his equipment.

He checked his dehydrates and chemical nutrients carefully. They would constitute his sole food supply for six months. He also inspected the other vital units of his equipment.

Then he went to the port restaurant and stowed away a meal of vast proportions. He ate with gusto, with grim pleasure, savoring the food, making the meal a sort of farewell symbol; a farewell to his eternally evil luck.

He drank heavily, but when he left the restaurant and went back to the ship he walked erect and his hands were rock-steady. Gunnison had one requirement of a true adventurer. He could hold his liquor.

But in another need of the soldier of fortune, he was sadly lacking. He was not a man of good luck. All his life he had pursued



wealth across the System and beyond without a single smile from fortune's gods.

Gunnison had certainly done his part. He was shrewd, daring, ruthless, if the need arose. He was clever and tireless, ever seeking out coups and strikes. But his coups never quite came off. And someone always beat him to the strikes. Once on Pluto he arrived at a diamond field well in advance of the

pack—but the Johnny-come-latelies walked away with fortunes while Gunnison grubbed doggedly on his barren claim.

So now he had spent his years and had but a handful of time left for a last try. A shot at the Ghannati, and no try could have been more desperate than this because failure meant death under the new laws.

Gunnison waited at the ship. The

pilot arrived, wiping the last of an evening meal off his mouth with the back of his hand. The pilot grinned.

"Still set on going?"

Gunnison smiled coldly. "If I've changed my mind can I get my money back?"

The pilot returned the grin. "I'm afraid I've already spent it."

Gunnison turned without comment and entered the ship.

THEY LIFTED from twilight into the bright sun-flare and Gunnison looked down into the shadows that lay across the dead face of Mars. He saw the canals and creeks meandering over the old sea bottoms like traceries on fine lace. He saw the city, half modern, the rest incredibly ancient; a weird mixture of the old and the new. Then the city and the sea bottom vanished in a haze as the ship reached up toward the apex of its arc. Gunnison remained by the port. The next thing he would see would be the borders of the dread Ghanati.

Sullen resentment welled up in Gunnison. He had read his history and he knew how things had changed. In the old days back on Terra, men were given freedom to seek and find. Why, once they opened half a planet — a whole hemisphere to those with the courage to move in and take it! Men

and women and even children in shoddy old wagons pushed across the prairies of his own Mid-America. No fat bureaucrats called the dance in those fine days.

But now the scheme of things was gall in Gunnison's mouth. New laws promulgated under the Interplanetary Charter said only the government men moved in on new territories; so-called specialists with weapons and armor who put one timid foot in front of another until the area was declared safe and open to colonization. And who also — Gunnison bitterly knew — skimmed off the loose loot for themselves.

The situation was an excuse for any thinking man's indignation. Why, even at the moment there were five sections of the red planet awaiting investigation by the interplanetary government; five lush opportunities wrapped so tight in governmental red tape that years would pass before steps were taken.

And men — fearless adventurers like Gunnison — would be executed for trespassing on these forbidden grounds. Gunnison spat in disgust. Then, as the ship tilted downward for the last leg of the jump, he thought of the Ghanati. His eyes narrowed and he was as close to fear as men like Gunnison ever came.

The Ghanati. Probably the only area on Mars where the govern-

ment's restrictions were really justified. How much was fact and how much was rumor, no one could say, but the Ghanati a tortuous cragland — was inhabited by a race of ugly throwbacks from which viciousness and ferocity could certainly be expected. A retiring people, they had stood unmolested for a thousand years and had never moved beyond their own boundaries.

A bleak, forbidding land, the Ghanati, wrapped in a silence long considered deadly. But a land rumored to be bursting with unmined gold.

The pilot set his ship down expertly in a hundred-yard square of level land surrounded by angry rock. Off to the north, the crags greatedened and roughened, marking the boundary of the mysterious stronghold of monsters.

The pilot helped Gunnison unload his gear and spoke with a mixture of amusement and admiration. "How did you know about this spot?" When Gunnison didn't answer, he went on. "But it's the only setdown on the whole border where you could get past the patrols."

Gunnison was packed and ready. He strapped on his antigrav belt and spoke amiably. "I'll be here this day and time six months from now." The pilot smiled. Gunnison smiled back, adding, "And you'd

better be here, because if you don't show, the universe won't be big enough for you to hide in."

The pilot appeared to be calculating the odds as Gunnison turned and moved away in long, clumsy steps.

SOON THE going got worse. The crags and razor-sharp rocks reared higher to form a scowling protectorate around — around what? Gunnison wondered. He kept his hand gun ready at all times but no living thing did he see.

The going would have been impossible without the antigrav belt but the unit was a problem in itself. Set to lift him clear, it would have dangled him helpless and kicking in space. Set at half power it forced him to move warily lest it tip him off balance and swing him into the knife-crags by his own momentum.

The day progressed. Gunnison labored grimly forward watching for signs of surface veins. But these were not the formations where nature hid the yellow metal. Gunnison drank sparingly on chance that his finding water would be delayed. He refreshed himself with oxygen at intervals and pressed on.

Until, late in the day, he made the find.

The barrier lands had given him their worst and then tilted gently downward with crag-points and edges less sharp. He made better

progress and soon the geological substances and formations changed. Gunnison's face grew less grim. He pushed on, bone weary. To come to the place of a rushing rivulet, of shaggy bush growth. Of gold.

He smiled as he shucked off his pack, enjoying even, the feeling of exhaustion. He'd made it! He had arrived for a last joust with fortune and the arena was all to his favor. He could not miss. The last little handful of time would pay off.

After taking nourishment he selected a rocky pocket overhung and buttressed on three sides and stowed his gear. As the sun lowered, he lifted himself to the highest knoll and looked over what country he could see. It was monotonously similar to the area on which he stood. Rough, basically level country rising very gently to a ridge in the distance. Beyond, there was probably a drop-off.

Gunnison returned to his pocket and settled in for the night. Perhaps this section was inhabited, although he doubted it. He checked his hand gun and closed his eyes for a night of hair-trigger sleep.

He awoke at dawn, unmolested and refreshed. He fed on dehydrates and drank deeply of the water and soon the sun poked its way up over the forbidden land. He took up his pan and rushed to a likely looking spot on the creek.

It was there—glittering yellow

in the gray sand. Gunnison, oblivious of his surroundings, went to his knees and began panning. The results were good. With a set smile on his face, he worked another panful. After an hour he became conscious of the pain in his knees. He began to straighten slowly. He was halfway up when he heard the whistling sound.

He jerked around, clawing up the gun in the safe motion and faced the direction of the whistle just in time to hurl himself from the path of a whizzing missile. The whistle became a shrill screech as the object hurtled past.

Gunnison rolled over and studied the thing as it arced upward. His muscles loosened in relief.

A bird. A black vicious-beaked hawk of some sort. Its size was about that of Gunnison's two-fists and its angry shrilling told of indignation against the two-legged intruder.

As Gunnison watched it keeled over in midair and went into another power dive. Its courage far outweighed its size as it rocketed down again—straight at his head. It came in screaming and Gunnison swiped at it sharply with his pan. He hit one outstretched wing and the scream of pain was more grating than the previous whistle of rage.

The bird caromed off drunkenly and missed the ground by inches.

Gunnison watched as it limped frantically back up the air current and disappeared over a low ridge. Then he went back to his work.

He stopped for neither food nor drink. Only when the sun left did he give up his panning and return to camp. Weary and stiff, he munched his dehydrates moodily, his exhaustion dimming the earlier elation and allowing him to consider things in true perspective. And force him to admit with some bitterness that again the gods of fortune had withheld the munificence his courage and privations merited.

Not that he had made no strike. He had sought gold and had found it but not as gold had been found by others — in chunks and nuggets. Not the luck he felt he was entitled to for the effort expended and the danger involved. His gold lay in sand to be taken gradually in ounces of dust and in direct ratio to further effort over the days ahead.

Thus Gunnison faced a decision. Panned out to the end, this strike would, in six months, give him enough to live comfortably for the rest of his life. He would acquire but a fraction of what he could carry but it would be immeasurably better than complete failure.

So — would he work out the time here — sure of the modest payoff — or gamble his time in hunting a really big strike? He weighed the

problem at length and decided on the sure thing. Take what fate grudgingly offered because as sure as destiny, the big take would be withheld in the end. There was no reason to believe that good luck — a stranger during all his years — would smile at this late hour. Having made his decision, he went to sleep, not even bothering to check his gun.

HE arose the next day and worked again, doggedly piling up the yellow dust. Early in the day the birds — a pair this time — came to repeat the previous day's attack. They swept down viciously and Gunnison fended them off and chased them away with equally vicious swipes of his pan. When they flew off, he went feverishly back to work.

And at high noon the natives came.

From whence, Gunnison did not know so intent was he upon his gray sand. A shadow tilted across his pan; he whirled, and there they were.

His first reaction was a curse because his gun lay twenty feet away. He crouched where he was, staring. They stood by the rushing water, staring back. Two long minutes passed.

Time enough for Gunnison to feel revulsion at the hideousness of the creatures. They were three in

number and he got the impression two were males and one a female although their appearance gave little indication either way.

They were bipeds towering some seven feet into the thin Martian atmosphere. Their bodies were misshapen from any standard Gunnison was familiar with. Legs far too long for their incredibly wide torsos. They wore a combination of natural hair and badly tanned leather skirts, and it was hard to tell where one left off and the other began. Their arms were like snapped-off tree trunks — at complete variance with other physical proportions. Their faces were probably the most disgusting aspect of all. Only the beginnings of faces, really with mouths, noses, and eye sockets mere holes punched into the flattened sides of round heads.

Even as he crouched there with only the hope of a quick death, Gunnison could not help marveling. What manner of pitiful throw-backs were these. Monsters spawned by the century-old atomic bombardment that smashed the last of the Martian resistance? Caricatures created by nature in a vindictive mood?

The natives stared. Gunnison stared back. And began breathing again as moments passed and the frightful trio did not rush in to annihilate him or take him for tor-

ture.

Then his fears were overshadowed by interest in these strange people. The three faces had been plastered with identical grimaces of amazing hideousness. Gunnison had interpreted it as an expression of cunning and cruelty. Now he changed his mind. Coupled with the embarrassed twistings and posturings of the ungainly bodies, the expressions dawned on Gunnison in truth.

The natives were grinning. Also, they were glancing continuously into the sky and Gunnison knew they were fearful. But fearful of what? Had they experienced the arrival of alien ships at one time or another? He did not think so.

Now the one he had tentatively classified as female went to her knees and brought a hand from behind her back. The hand held forth a dish of colorless material that Gunnison thought to be food. The creature went prone and pushed the dish forward on the ground in a veritable agony of shy embarrassment.

Without thinking, Gunnison extended his own hand and laid it on the hideous head. The result was amazing. The monster increased her senseless writhings twofold and a shade of attractive lavender diffused her face.

She was blushing. Gunnison thought: They're entirely harm-

less, these creatures. More than that, they're a people shy to the point of pain. Good lord, what a switch!

Now the two males went suddenly crazy with fear. They looked into the sky and went into gibbering gymnastics as they sought to prevail on Gunnison without touching him. Obviously they wanted him to leave this terrible place. Why?

Evidently because of the black bird that circled over head. Gunnison looked up. The natives babbled inarticulate entreaty as they gestured toward Gunnison's camp. Then, as the bird gave forth an angry whistle and went into its dive, they broke and bolted madly for the nearby crags.

Gunnison, his eye on the bird did not see where they went. The bird arced down and Gunnison clipped it square on the beak, with his pan. The bird did a somersault, gained its wings, and headed drunkenly for the ridge, screaming in rage.

Gunnison turned his eyes on the crags. The natives were nowhere in sight. He pondered the situation for a few moments and then went back to work. The natives, he told himself with great satisfaction, were not a menace.

augmented it. They were not merely harmless. Their eagerness to be helpful was almost pathetic. They came regularly to sit and watch Gunnison at his labors. At times as many as two dozen crowded about to regard him with obvious awe.

Gunnison's identification of male and female was strengthened when two of the men hauled a woman to the edge of his camp and threw her forward almost into his gear pile. The woman seemed overcome both by fear and honor at the same time. The effect was ludicrous and Gunnison risked displeasure by signifying definitely that he did not want a mate. They took no offense. The female walked away sadly, her ugly head hanging.

Gunnison's camp became a depository for weird and useless gifts. These consisted of old bones, scraps of hide, various evil-smelling concoctions of food. Animal teeth strung in necklaces and laid proudly at his feet.

Gunnison was careful to show no annoyance at this expanding pile of debris. Not that he feared antagonizing them. He was convinced this could not be done. But out of compassion because they were so childlike, so innocent of evil save in their appearance.

He tried to turn them to his advantage. He spent a whole morning attempting to teach, one of the

THE PASSING days not only strengthened this belief but

males to use a pan. The results were nil. The creature was incapable of understanding the difference between the gray sand and the yellow dust. To him, both were equally useless — or equally valuable. The only result was the native's despondency at being unable to please Gunnison.

But Gunnison was philosophical about it. Even if he had channeled the native to his purpose the monster would have been of little help because at sight of the black birds all of them always ran screaming into the rocks to stay hidden for hours.

So Gunnison was philosophical. But also bitter, because even so extraordinary a situation as this still brought him no profit. He had a tribe of abject slaves at his command. Child-men willing to give him anything they owned even to the hair off their own hides. But what did they own? Nothing but old bones and teeth and nauseating concoctions they used for food.

Gunnison had explored the area roundabout and had discovered what was probably the ruins of an ancient city. If so, the place flourished before the dawn of history because the buildings were only vague heaps of rubble. The natives lived in these and, Gunnison suspected, in caves among the rocks.

Evidently this race was older than he had first suspected. They

squatted here on the ruins of some long-dead civilization. Perhaps their ancestors conquered the city's founders and these pitiful creatures were the last remnants of a retrograding race.

So Gunnison cursed them in his wearier moments and patronized them the rest of the time. They in turn drooped visibly at the sharpness in his voice and wriggled in dog-like delight at his kind words. Obviously yearning to do something for him—to serve this new master. As the months went by he began thinking of them as the people who feared birds and pretty much ignored them. He panned tirelessly, increasing his horde, counting the days and weeks and months.

And as the fifth month passed, his dust pile was small for the bitter work expended but a larger stake than he had ever before acquired. It would keep him in comfort, if not in luxury.

During the first week of the sixth month he learned painfully that the native's fear of the birds had some foundation. The birds had never ceased their attacks and he had learned to fend them off pretty much as a man swats flies. But upon this morning his attention was riveted to a particularly large reward of yellow dust from his last panning and one of the black raiders got through. It drove its bill into his neck with a squawk

of triumph and got up and away before his swinging fist could smash it down.

He slapped his hand over the puncture and swore at the bird. Damned nuisances! He looked at his hand and saw blood.

H E FORGOT the incident for ten minutes. Then a dull ache brought his hand again to his neck. He found a lump the size of an egg. First, he was merely annoyed, then mildly frightened as the dull ache turned into a sharp pain.

There were some drugs among his gear. He put down his pan and moved toward camp. Perhaps the wound should be lanced and disinfected. He had taken but ten steps when the lump seemed to bulge under his fingers. The sharp pain shot downward through his neck and into his shoulders.

Another step and agony such as he had never known took possession of his body. He tried to scream but his throat was paralyzed. A condition past all panic seized his mind as the agony became too great to bear.

In those last few seconds he lost his mind, asking for death with his last conscious thought.

And within fifteen minutes of the bird's attack, Gunnison lay dead in the bleak fastnesses of the Ghanati.

The natives found him and went into protestations of violent grief. They groveled and demonstrated their adoration by rubbing their faces brutally upon the ground.

But like the children they were, they soon became joyful in the knowledge that they could serve Gunnison in death far better than in life.

They lifted his body and formed a procession as they bore it to the center of their ruined city. Once there, they went deep into one of the caves and brought forth those things their heritage taught them were valuable only to the dead. Things they and their ancestors and the great race that preceded them gave only to the dead.

A casket requiring ten carriers for the lifting. A burial robe for the corpse. Casks and urns and numerous articles to be used by Gunnison in the next world.

They buried him reverently as it was given them to understand reverence. There was singing, dancing, and much joy.

So Gunnison came thus to his end. A grave deep in the Ghanati and there is nothing of importance left to tell. Nothing of importance, but one note of possible interest.

The casket and the robe and all the farewell gifts were exquisitely fashioned.

From purest gold.



As a galactic reporter Jane Crowley knew she had hold of the biggest story of the year; thousands of people were soon to die on this —

Planet Of Doom

by

C. H. Thames

Illustrated by W. E. Terry

LESS THAN an hour after the last spaceship made touchdown on Mandmoora, Jane Crowley stood before a scowling, head shaking public Information Officer.

"My company sent me fifty light years from its nearest base in the Denebian system, Colonel," Jane said. "I'm sorry, but it's impossible for me to return to Deneb without my story."

"This office has issued press releases, my dear Miss Crowley, which —"

"Press releases!" The way Jane uttered those two words made the Colonel wince. "I didn't come fifty light years for press releases. I came" She watched the Colonel's face and let her voice trail off. This approach was having absolutely no effect. But Jane Crowley was a

woman, young and quite pretty and it was likely, she thought, that where the straightforward, man-to-man approach might fail, the ways of a woman might succeed. "But Colonel," she pouted, then let her composed face fall apart as if she were going to cry. "But Colonel, my job depends on this story. My . . . my whole career . . . you see . . ." she sniffled.

"There now, Miss Crowley," the Colonel said, looking very uncomfortable. "There now, miss. Please."

"Then you'll let me go out there among the Mandmoora?"

"I'm sorry, miss. Out of the question. Definitely out. We've evacuated all the Mandmoora who want to go. What remains is a hard core of Mandmoorian fanatics who refuse to leave their na-

tive planet under any circumstances. They've got an island just off shore here, you see. They're sun-worshippers. Ironical, isn't it? Sun-worshippers. Their sun about to go nova on them, boiling all the oceans of this waterworld and killing every speck of life on Mandmoora, and they're sun-worshippers. They just won't go. They want to stay. They say we can't make them go and they're right, we can't. Poor devils. They'll be boiled and broiled alive, all three thousands of 'em. But this headquarters can't send men out to their island after them. They'd resist and it would mean bloodshed, on both sides. We won't have it."

The Colonel's haggard face brightened, and he went on: "There's your story, Miss Crowley. Three thousand die-hard sun-worshippers, facing certain death at the altar of the very deity they adore. File *that* story from Deneb, Miss Crowley."

"It's been filed a hundred times already," Jane said, shaking her head. "You know it has."

The Colonel shrugged. "I refuse to authorize your going out to Mandmoora Island. Be reasonable, miss, can't you? We have evacuated a hundred million Mandmooras in history's greatest mass exodus. Three thousand fanatics don't want out. Three

thousand fanatics will broil with their world, then. That's all."

"But if they could be led to understand."

"I thought you wanted a story. A human interest story, wasn't it?"

"I was only thinking out loud."

"I've given you the only story you'll get here. Why should your video service expect more than the others?"

"No reason, I guess," Jane knew now that the answer was definitely no. She was hardly listening to the Colonel as he went on. There had to be another way, somewhere, somehow. It was the story of the century — and there wasn't another newsman on Mandmoora with a chance to scoop her. Which also meant that if Jane didn't get the story, the rest of the civilized galaxy wouldn't, either, except for watered-down public information releases.

"... otherwise," the Colonel was saying. "The press people have said we were more than fair, miss. We let them set up a headquarters beyond the Mandmoorean sun's eighth planet: our experts said the nova won't explode that far, you know. Headquarters will be safe there. We've even agreed to let the last ship out stop at press headquarters for an interview before it

goes subspace for the dash to Deneb. What could be fairer?"

"Nothing, I guess," Jane said.

"Well, thank you for your time, Colonel."

"Not at all, young lady." The Colonel touched something on his desk and a door at the other end of the office opened, iris-ing with a faint hissing sound. Through it Jane could hear the sounds of office machinery, think-writers and duplics and a sub-space ticker coming in with the news from the rest of the galaxy.

A woman, thought Jane. Maybe if I was a man it would have been different, but they wanted a woman's viewpoint because it's a heartstring-plucking story. She recalled the Colonel's first incredulous outburst. "But I can't send a woman out there, Miss Crowley. A woman!"

AS SHE reached the door, impulse became idea and idea came to the surface for execution. "Thank you very much, Colonel," she said in a clear, loud voice. "Interstellar News Alliance knew it could count on you."

"What's that?" demanded the Colonel in a voice barely audible across the large room. He was busy now with a mountain of last minute paperwork and was listening only with one ear, the rest of

him already hard at work.

"Thanks again, Colonel," Jane said, and stepped through the iris-ed shutter of a door. She turned to show her best smile to the sergeant-major at the desk immediately outside the door. "There, sergeant," she said, smiling. "You see? I told you the Colonel would give me an unlimited pass."

"I never would of believed it," the sergeant said, looking at the smile and daring a glance at the rest of Jane Crowley, which was every bit as delightful as the pretty way she showed her teeth.

"An unlimited pass, sergeant. Make one out for me, please."

The sergeant-major nodded and took a book of forms from a drawer in his desk. He wrote for a while, then said, "That's C-r-o-w-l-e-y, ma'am?"

"Right."

"Any time limit on the pass?"

"None at all," Jane said, still amazed that her ruse, her show of elation had actually worked.

The sergeant-major applied the finishing touches to the pass with an ink-stamp duplicate of the Colonel's signature and handed the stiff plastic rectangle to Jane. "There you are, ma'am," he said. "But watch your step, Miz Crowley. The last ship's blasting off in twenty hours, with or without the Mandamooras. Twenty

hours, ma'am. So please don't get lost."

Jane thanked him, smiled again, and got out of there.

Five minutes later, the Colonel buzzed for his sergeant-major. "Yes, sir?" the sergeant asked, poking his head in through the irisng door.

"Well, I see the lady reporter didn't give much trouble after I made it clear the answer was no. Now, about that Sbogan file. Sbogan, that is the name?"

"Yeah, Sbogan. Fomalhautian name. What did you . . . did you say, sir?"

"The Sbogan file should --"

"No. About the reporter. You told her no? Your answer was no, sir?"

"Naturally. We couldn't let her put her pretty head in the lion's mouth."

"Oh, Lord, sir," the sergeant-major said. "I gave her an unlimited pass."

"Sergeant!"

"She said you had . . . sir . . ."

"An unlimited pass -- sergeant! Send out an alarm for that girl. We're all right as long as she doesn't leave the mainland. But if she goes to the Mandmooran Island, where those hold-out sun-worshippers are . . ."

"She'll make tracks for there, all right," the sergeant-major predicted.

"Stop her. Stop her before she gets that far! Because once she crosses to the island, there isn't a thing we can do about it. You can't tell a nova to wait, sergeant!"

"I'll try to stop her, sir."

"Make it a general alarm, sergeant. You've got to stop her."

Moments later, Jane Crowley's description was being radio'd to every martial checkpoint in the city of Northport.

IT WAS very hot and sultry on the tarry streets of Northport. It had been an exotic city, really exotic, Jane thought. You could tell by the out-of-this-world architecture, but oddly — with nothing but the uniformed figures of the interstellar rescue organization to be seen on the streets — Northport lost most of its charm. For the charm of any alien place, of any exotic world, lies in its people. Jane had once made a broadcast to that effect, and it had been very well received. It would be nothing though, absolutely nothing, compared to what Jane almost had in her grasp now. A final interview with the die-hards, with the Mand-

moorans who refused to leave their planet because they had faith in the sun which would soon, in hardly more than hours, destroy them.

The docks were crowded, littered with the worldly belongings of a few score Mandmoorans who had changed their mind and had paddled over from the island. A squad of soldiers was busy processing them and the Mandmoorans, big muscular purple-skinned men with shocks of stiff lemon-yellow hair and smaller women, brittle-looking women with strange, wasp-waisted figures, glanced up frequently at the sky. Their sun, a faintly bluish white star, seemed somehow swollen. It actually seemed larger to Jane than it had been when she had landed several hours ago. Probably, she told herself, that's imagination. On the other hand, the Mandmoorans would certainly have been able to see a change in solar size by this time. For the Mandmoorean sun had doubled its apparent size in the past ten days, Jane had been told at the P. I. office.

The only result so far was the sweltering heat on Mandmoora. The heat, though, was not lethal. There had been hot summers before; the die-hard sun-worship-

pers had said. So they had told Jane at the P. I. O. The natives said nothing, could be made to say nothing, about the swollen appearance of the sun they worshipped.

In twenty hours their last chance for rescue would be gone. In thirty hours, Mandmoora's sun would go nova, bursting to a million times its former luminosity in micro-seconds, sending out a shell of intensely hot gases which, when it reached Mandmoora, would instantly destroy all life on the planet. Including three thousand sun-worshippers waiting devoutly for their deity to prove the interstellar interlopers wrong

"Hey, Miss!" someone cried suddenly. It was an Army corporal running toward her, bulling his way through a knot of Mandmooran refugees. "You're Jane Crowley, ain't you? He was only a dozen strides away now, and shouting. "Because I got orders to

Jane didn't hear the rest of it. She turned and ran down the length of the deserted quay adjacent to the one strewn with Mandmooran belongings. She reached the end of the quay and whirled. The corporal was trotting confidently toward her, in no great

hurry now. For she had trapped herself on the quay. She was very angry with herself. A fine newshen you are, she thought. First chance you have, you let yourself get caught. A finē

Something gave her a raucous razzing, something out over the water. She whirled and faced it. A runabout whizzed in across the blue water toward her. Someone was waving.

She waved back frantically, suddenly recognizing him. It was Sid Masters. She had met Sid on the ship which had taken both of them to Mandmoora. Sid was with the electronics outfit setting up camera equipment on Mandmoora, equipment which would transmit through subspace the pictures of a sun going nova seen from the surface of its only inhabited planet. She had struck up a quick friendship with Sid on the space-liner.

Making up her mind suddenly, Jane didn't wait for the running corporal to reach her. Instead, she turned and jumped off the quay.

She came up sputtering. The water was tepid, was typical harbor-water, fouled with gasoline and debris. Master's gas-turbine driven boat was very close now. The sound of its motor almost drowned out the corporal's shouts

as Jane treaded water.

"Going to the island," Masters shouted. "You?"

"They don't want me to, Sid!"

He smiled. She couldn't hear all of what he said, but she got the last part of it. ". . . want me to, either. Hop in, beautiful."

There was a splash behind her. Jane turned and saw the corporal break surface, yelling and waving his arms. She stroked for Sid Masters' runabout. The electronics technician shouted his encouragement, but as she got one hand on the gunwale of the idling runabout, Jane felt something grab and tug at her leg.

She lashed out with her free leg, churning water. But the corporal clung grimly to her ankle. Then an old, half-rotted oar appeared alongside Jane's heel, and with it — guiding it — Sid Masters' arms. The oar went out over the water and probed and a moment later the corporal shouted and Jane felt the pressure leave her ankle.

"Hop aboard and be quick about it," Masters yelled.

Jane needed no urging. She scrambled ungracefully over the gunwale. She was dripping wet and thought she looked a mess. But Masters merely said, "Pleasure to have you aboard, beau-

tiful," and the runabout roared and headed out across the harbor to the island, to the last remnant of the three-thousand sun-worshipping Mandmoorans who waited for a miracle which would not come to save them.

"SIMPLE," Sid Masters said in answer to Jane's question half an hour later. "I thought it would be a good idea to set up camera equipment on the island itself, to show the galaxy the last sun-worshipping rites of the Mandmoorans -- before their god killed them. Maybe it's heartless, but it's good journalism. Besides, it isn't up to me to get the Mandmoorans off their island. I'd gladly film their exodus instead, and first-hand, not with automatic equipment. Anyhow, Colonel, what's his name at P. I. O. said no."

"And you didn't take no for an answer?"

"I didn't take no for an answer. Hell, all I have to do is set up the equipment so the Mandmoorans don't see it and get off the island. It shouldn't be hard."

"I want to get a final impression of the Mandmooran sun-worshippers as they wait for the end," Jane said. "As you said, Sid, it isn't pretty but it's good

journalism. Sure, I'd rather not get my story and see them saved --"

"But if they're going to die you want the story. Right?"

"Yes," Jane said. Then: "I want to thank you, Sid --"

He grinned. "You looked so helpless there on the end of the quay. You were wringing your hands, did you know it?"

"What a sight that must have been. Sid!" Jane cried abruptly. "Sid! We're being followed. That boat --"

"Of course we're being followed. But this runabout's got good speed. They won't catch us before we reach the island. And once we reach it, they probably have orders not to land under any circumstances. They -- hey, wait a minute! Look behind them."

At first Jane didn't get it. She looked ahead and saw the green smear of the sun-worshippers' island, expanding out from the horizon toward them. They'd be beaching the light-weight, lithium-alloy runabout in a matter of minutes, she thought. Then, after that . . .

"No Jane. I said behind them. Behind the boat following us."

At first she saw nothing but the dazzling suntrack across the

water back there. Then, dancing on the suntrack as if belonging to it, scores of silver midges. But a while ago, the single boat pursuing them had looked like a silver midge.

"Boats," Jane said.

"Boats. A whole fleet of them."

"What can it mean, Sid?"

"Beats me. I can guess, though. Jane, maybe we're going to be in on the kind of ending we'd rather see."

"I don't understand."

"It's a fleet of evacuation craft, probably. Making a last attempt to get the Mandmoorans off their island. Maybe they had some word from the sun-worshipping chief out there, I don't know."

"Should we wait until they land?"

"Not on your life," Sid said.

"We've broken a law, Jane. They'd take us into custody until the whole operation was over. Well beach this boat like we planned, and then my equipment—"

"And my pad and pencil," Jane said.

"— go to work."

Moments later they could see a throng of the Mandmoorans waiting on the beach for them, the brilliant purple of their

bodies gleaming metallically against the dead white sands.

THE MANDMOORAN chief was a big fellow six and a half feet tall. He was old: the shock of stiff yellow hair had faded to a corn-silk color, the purple skin was wrinkle-creased and had lost some of its sheen. But he carried himself straight and tall and he looked every inch a chieftain.

"We stay here," he told Sid in English. "Lord Sun no kills worship people. You tell soldiers?"

"They're coming," Sid said. "See? We have nothing to do with that."

"You not with them?"

"Not us," Sid said.

"What then you want?"

Sid looked at Jane, who shrugged. Words and phrases were already forming in her mind. The sad proud look on the old chief's face. The gleaming, healthy, royal purple Mandmoorans. The dried, withered vegetation all around them, scorched by the swollen sun. The angry, resentful look on some of the Mandmooran faces behind the chief. The distant wailing chant of the sun-worshipping priests.

" . . . cameras," Sid was saying. "As for the lady, she only

wants to talk with you and look around some. All right?"

"Twice," the chief said slowly, "your soldiers try to trick us. Third time now."

Sid shrugged. "We're not soldiers."

"You have nothing to do with them?"

"We have nothing to do with them."

"Third trick make people angry."

"If there's a third trick, we're no part of it."

The chief nodded solemnly and turned to face the water. Ahead of the flotilla, a single runabout was quite close to land now. Jane recognized the corporal who had chased her out on the quay. With him were two other soldiers.

"Halloa!" the corporal shouted. "Hallo, Miz Crowley; Won't do you no good to try and hide. We got orders to take you back. Mr. Master with you, ma'am. You'll come peacefully?"

"We won't come any way at all," Sid said defiantly. "Not until we're good and ready."

The chief suddenly strode forward, to the edge of the water and then ankle deep in the surf. "Wait," he said, lifting both hands solemnly. "You and these two — you know one an-

other?"

"They're Miz Crowley and Mr. Masters," the corporal shouted back.

"And you know they come here?"

"Heck, yes," said the corporal. "It's why we came. Following them."

"Otherwise you no have come?"

"That's right."

"Then you go," the chief said in a strong, solemn voice. "Tell others. Go! You come close, we hurt these two people. You try to land, take us off — we kill them. We stay here. Our right is to stay. Our Lord Sun no hurt Mandmooras. Lord Sun for life and growing of crops, not for death. You go."

"You can't keep them for hostages," the corporal shouted across the water. "You can't do that."

THE CHIEF let his right hand fall. A line of spearmen trotted up behind him and let fly with a fusillade of long-shafted spears. The spears fell around the military runabout, but none of them touched it.

"They stay," the chief said, "You take hundred million Mandmooras off Mandmoora, we keep two earth people here to see

nothing happens to Lord Sun. Now go!"

"Sid," Jane said. "Sid, did you hear him? They — they're going to keep us here, and — Sid, is there any chance the sun won't go nova?"

Sid shook his head. His face looked suddenly bleak. "No chance at all, kid. I guess we should have listened."

"Sid, I'm scared."

There was a roaring sound as the runabout, instead of retreating, came bucketing toward the beach. "Come on down to the water!" the corporal bawled at the top of his voice. "We'll get you!"

The Chief raised his hand. Another line of spearmen came trotting forward. "Go back," Sid shouted. "They'll kill you!"

But the runabout came toward them on the heaving surf. Before the chief could raise his hand a second time, the corporal stood up in the prow of the runabout and fired a blaster toward the beach. He had fired it high and he waited for it to disperse the spearmen. When it did not, he fired again, lower. The chief lifted his hand and brought it down. A volley of spears leaped from muscular arms, arching in the sunlight, dropping toward the

runabout

The corporal fired again and a figure near the chief slumped to the sand. Then the runabout, riddled by fifty spears at the waterline, began to sink.

"Take them," the chief said.

A score of Mandmooras swarmed out through the surf toward the sinking boat. Jane watched as they surrounded it and brought the three soldiers back with them quickly. By then the runabout had gone under, but the flotilla of rescue craft was now only a few hundred yards offshore and coming fast.

"Five hostages," the chief said. "Tell them go."

Voices shouted back and forth across the water, but Jane saw that the chief wasn't listening. Instead, he went to the man who had fallen before the corporal's blaster. He knelt and took the yellow shocked head on his knee and murmured to it. The young Mandmoora's right arm had been all but blasted off at the elbow. Blood was gushing and pumping from severed arteries. The chief raised his head and wailed:

"Grower, healer, Lord Sun! Save the Princeling of your people. Grower, healer, Lord Sun!" he chanted, repeating it. "Grower"

"Princeling?" Sid said. "The old boy's son, you think?"

"If they just keep chanting and leave him like that, the poor boy'll bleed to death. Can't we do something?"

Just then an amplified voice came across the water toward them, metallic and somehow unreal. "Masters! Miss Crowley. We'll stay here. We won't budge until — until it's too late. Until we have to leave. But we can't come after you. The Mandmooras would fight. There would be death on both sides and — I'm sorry, Masters, Miss Crowley. We are positively forbidden to use force of arms here. You understand?"

It was a rhetorical question. It did not matter if they understood or not. The flotilla would wait — hopelessly. The flotilla would leave when it had to. And the corporal and his companions, along with Sid Masters and Jane, would be left with the Sun-trusting Mandmooras.

THE MANDMOORAN prince's face was ashen with pain and loss of blood. The chief cradled his head, and mumbled, and chanted. And the blood pumped from the severed arteries.

A ring of Mandmooran guards

surrounded Jane, Sid Masters and the three soldiers, but when Jane walked through the ring, quite close to two of the spear-men, they did not try to stop her. It was because of the Mandmooran women, she decided: the Mandmooran women were so small and fragile-looking that their men would never take the guarding of a woman seriously.

Jane went over to where the chief was kneeling by his stricken son. "Unless you stop the bleeding," she said quietly, "he's going to die. Don't you know that?"

"Healer sun stop bleeding. Lord Sun."

Jane shook her head. "The sun is a slow healer. The sun can't perform medical miracles. I have no argument with your religion, chief — but we can save your boy's life if you let us."

At first Jane thought she had failed. The Chief continued chanting over his son, not looking at the Earthgirl. Then, slowly, he looked up. Not at Jane, not immediately at Jane: he let his gaze come to rest on the Mandmooran sun, faintly bluish and clearly swollen now, egg-shaped almost as its internal forces gathered themselves for the final cataclysmic explosion which, in hours, would all but tear the

star apart. Even a fanatic sun-worshipper would know now that something was wrong with their deity. On the other hand, a fanatic sun-worshipper might regard the change, Jane realized, as a manifestation of displeasure. Hadn't all but an infinitesimal fraction of the Mandmoorans deserted their god? Wasn't that reason enough for the wrath of the Lord Sun?

But then the chief looked at Jane. His eyes were sad and old and suddenly and unexpectedly very wise. He said, "You can help? You can save his life?"

"You're not trying," Jane said. "I can try."

Carefully the chief stood up, making a mound of sand and letting his son's head rest there. "Then save him," he said finally. "Save him and you can return to your people."

A very old Mandmooran, far older than the chief, a skin-puckered, limping, hunch-backed, rheumy-eyed gray-skinned Mandmooran, approached the chief and jabbered excitedly in their own language. The chief jabbered back at him and the old man raised his voice. The chief shouted him down. Shrugging but smiling, the old man wandered off to a hillock of sand, threw his arms up at the

Lord Sun, and began a weird, wailing chant.

"Shaman say," the chief told Jane, "yours is bad medicine."

Jane didn't answer. She went down on one knee near the injured prince. It almost made her ill to stare at his torn, mangled arm. She was no nurse. She knew first aid, but that was all. Still, anything was better than the fatalistic Mandmooran attitude.

"Shaman say," the chief went on, "we offer sacrifice to wrath of Lord Sun. For long time our people no offer sacrifice in human form. Human sacrifice now, at moment of trial, work. So say shaman."

Turning, the chief shouted something. Three spearmen stalked within the circle around the Earthmen and came out with the uniformed figure of the corporal. The ancient shaman jabbered excitedly, but the chief did not look happy.

SID MASTERS came brawling through the ring of spearmen, fighting clear with flailing arms and legs. "Wait a minute, chief!" he cried. "Who's running the show round here, you or that magician?"

The shaman jabbered, but the chief silenced him with a ges-

ture. "I am chief of the Mandmoora," he said slowly.

"The girl is trying to save your son's life. Is that the thanks we get — what you're going to do with the corporal?"

The chief was silent for a few moments, meditating. Then: "Let him go. Until the girl has succeeded — or failed."

The shaman jabbered again. He didn't like it but he returned, grumbling, to his hillock. Jane was already going to work on the stricken prince. First she tore a strip from her jumper and used it to bind the prince's upper arm. The bleeding was first. She had to stop the bleeding. Twisting a pencil in the knotted tourniquet, she tightened it until the blood had stopped flowing. She felt anything but calm. She actually felt queasy. But somehow her fingers worked quickly and surely and before long a few score of the Mandmoorans came to watch.

"He's lost an awful lot of blood," Jane told Sid Masters. "I've stopped the bleeding now, but he needs a transfusion if he's going to have a real chance. And look at the wound, will you? It's dirty. He needs antibiotics and he needs them fast."

"On the flotilla out there?" Sid asked. "They ought to have

antibiotics."

"Get them then," Jane said, and turned to the chief. "My companion needs strong medicine from the boats which wait."

"Stay. All stay."

"Then your son dies."

The chief looked at her. He was very quiet. The shaman wailed louder now. "Go," said the chief, and Sid Masters went splashing out into the water.

Five minutes later, swimming hard, he returned to the beach. He produced a water-proof packet of anti-biotic powders and Jane opened it and let the powders sift down on the prince's wound. "Listen," Sid whispered. "We're in trouble, all right. They can't be sure when the sun is going to nova, you see? They figure it ought to be about seventeen hours, but nobody's going to make book with his life. They're giving us fifteen minutes. Then they're pulling out. They're sorry, but they're pulling out. You can't blame them, Jane, especially since interstellar law won't permit them the use of force."

"But you came back, Sid," Jane said.

"We're trying to help the boy. Besides, I couldn't leave you holding the bag like this — alone

with those soldiers and three thousand fanatic Mandmoorans."

Jane smiled at him. There was nothing else she could offer him now. Their deaths seemed almost a certainty. They would be — had to be — deserted. They would be left to the Mandmoora — and the novaing sun.

"Is the boy going to live?" Sid asked.

"For a while. I've done all that first aid can do. The bleeding's stopped. The antibiotics will take care of any possibility of infection. But he's lost blood. If he doesn't get a transfusion soon, I'm afraid he won't pull through."

"Then tell the chief."

Jane nodded, and found the chief near the shaman's hillock, gazing on his medicine man with a troubled expression as if he couldn't decide between the old way and the new. "Your boy," Jane said.

"The boy lives?"

"For now he lives. He needs the kind of medical care I can't give him. The kind of care he can get aboard the exodus ships. Let him go, chief. Let us take him back. We can save his life."

THE SHAMAN leaped from the hillock and — for all his

bag-of-bones appearance — alighted athletically beside them. "I heard!" he cackled, showing a toothless black hole of a mouth. "I heard! A trick to leave our island. A trick to leave our planet! A trick . . ."

"Just the boy then," Jane said. "If you want him to live. But you'll never know about it. Because if you stay here you'll all be killed."

"You see, a trick!" protested the shaman.

The chief shook his head slowly. "Life blood flow from boy. Boy would have died. She save boy. If she wish, let the boy go with them."

"But they stay here!" the shaman shrieked. "They must stay. Sacrifice all to Lord Sun, Lord Sun shrink again. Otherwise —" He showed the palms of his hands in a hopeless gesture.

"Bring small boat," the chief said, making up his mind. "The girl goes, with princeling, to her people."

But Jane shook her head. "Not alone, I don't. I go with this man here and with the three soldiers, or I don't go at all. And neither does your son. We can save his life, chief — but we don't intend to if you —"

"Tricks! Deceit!" screamed the shaman, jumping up and down. "Kill them! Kill them all!"

An uncertain line of spearmen appeared, but the chief lifted his hand and they remained perfectly still as if with the small motion of his arm he had somehow frozen them in their tracks. The spearmen seemed content: they had come forward at the shaman's summons without great resolution.

All at once the shaman leaped at Jane. He came so suddenly that she had time only for a quick look. Still, she had not missed the gleam of something in his hand and she threw herself sideways as the hand came down. She heard the chief shout, heard Sid Masters' startled oath as she fell to the sand with the old medicine man. Something burned against her shoulder and she knew it was his knife, knew it had pierced her flesh there. She felt a wave of giddiness, but after that the pain wasn't so bad. She could see Sid lifting the shaman bodily and flinging him away across the sand like an empty sack, could see Sid's face, grave with concern, swim close to her through the suddenly shimmering range of vision before her eyes.

"Bleeding pretty bad," Sid said. "Ought to be able to control it with the pressure point in your neck. Hurt much?"

Jane shook her head.

"Here goes then."

"Wait." Jane pushed his hand away. She could feel the warm wetness of her blood streaming down across her breast from the shoulder wound. She turned to the chief:

"I stopped your son's bleeding," she said calmly. "I saved his life. Stop my bleeding, chief. Save my life in return."

The chief looked at her without answering. Then he looked at the shaman, who had climbed to hands and knees but made no move to get up.

"Don't do it!" Sid pleaded. "He can't save you and you know it. You'll bleed to death."

Jane asked the chief, "You want to help me?"

"Girl saved princeling's life. I want to help."

"Then stop the bleeding. I've lost a lot of blood, chief. I'm growing weak. You have to stop . . . the bleeding . . ."

THE CHIEF seemed confused. He looked first at the medicine man, then at Jane, then at the flotilla of exodus ships

which even while Jane spoke was turning and heading out to sea, back to the mainland just beyond the horizon. He looked at Jane again. He opened his mouth to speak, but no sound came. Then, finally, in a soft voice he said: "Your people save my people. Millions of them. Take to new home, because old home, old world, die. Some stay. Some — us. You come. Final chance for Mandmoora. Boy hurt and you save him. Man go to ships for good medicine. Could stay, but come back to help boy. You save boy. Princeling. I have no faith in your medicine, but he live. He live. Then you hurt. You bleed. Life blood run out. You bleed. You have faith, faith in chief of Mandmoora, to heal you. You have much faith." He raised his voice suddenly, shouting:

"I can no heal! You die if you do not heal yourself. I can no heal! Faith? Your faith in me kill you. Faith? If Sun-Lord fail us. Faith" he wailed, a broken man.

Sid Masters said, "Keep your faith, chief. There are other symbols, other suns. Your mistake was placing all your faith in one physical symbol —"

"Enough," the chief said. "The girl is right. I should save her as

she save princeling. I no can heal! The girl is right. All your people's threats, all offers, all bribes, all speech and science explains, all, all fail. The girl alone win. Faith alone no good. Faith and deeds. Girl show deeds. But I no can heal! I no can heal! Stop bleeding, Earthman. Heal her."

Sid looked at Jane. She smiled up at him weakly. She had almost lost consciousness. She had lost much blood and, like the prince of the Mandmoora, would need a transfusion when they returned to the mainland and the final ship of the exodus space-fleet. But they had won, because the chief said:

"Girl teach us. Earthgirl. We all go."

The soldiers gave a wild whoop of joy as Sid rushed down to the surf, hailed the flotilla. Jane was barely aware of the fleet turning around to come back for the Mandamoora's final three thousand holdouts. The whole planet would be evacuated after all, she thought. It was hard to hold the thought. She was almost delirious with weakness, with lack of blood. She felt Sid's hand applying pressure to the pulse in the curve of her neck.

She heard his words: "Bleed-

ing's stopped"

Then, for a long time, there was a gentle rocking moment and a vision, half-remembered, of the three thousand holdouts splashing out across the surf toward the rescue flotilla, then, after that, a slow drifting off toward sleep.

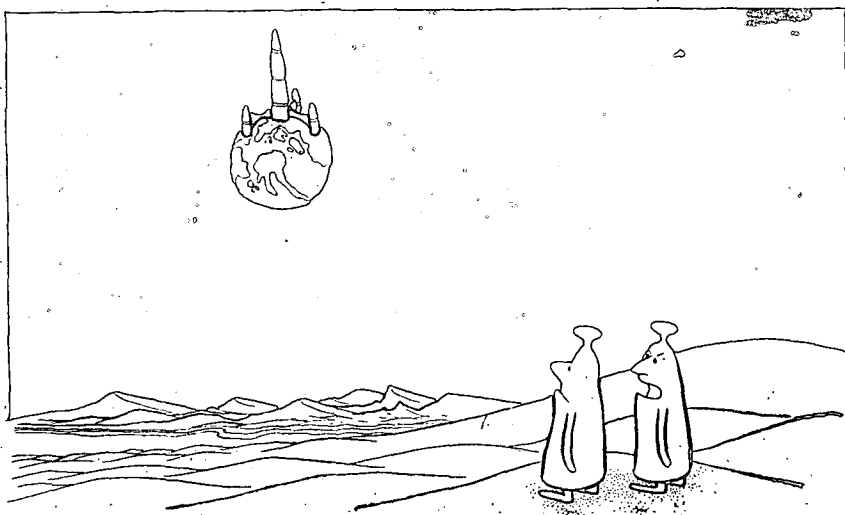
She knew they would make it, knew not a human being, Earthman or Mandmooran, would be on Mandmoora when the sun's blowup occurred. She knew she would not see the blowup from deep-

space: she would be aboard the spaceship in a hospital room.

She regretted that. It was a once-in-a-lifetime story, the kind of story a reporter didn't want to miss. But she had seen another story, a far greater story, the story of the final Mandmooran exodus, the story of life triumphant in the face of superstition and death.

She knew that was a far better story. And, besides, she had lived it.

THE END



Steehler

"What do you mean, 'stop worrying'? Don't you know mass migration when you see it?"

MYSTERY AT MESA FLAT

by

Ivar Jorgensen

A small desert town didn't seem a likely place to encounter murder — especially one that had been planned on a world light years away!

Illustrated by W. E. Terry

THE MURDER was committed ten minutes before the Otarkian ship lifted for the long trip back to the mother-planet. It was discovered ten minutes after blast off. The killer — a great lout of an upper-hillman, signed on the last moment to fill a sudden vacancy — bragged of the kill to his sergeant.

Bragged grinning. "He was crouched behind a rock peeking out at the ship. I came behind him — very quiet. I broke his neck and — and did other things. He never knew what happened."

The guard was rushed immediately before the Commander — into the dread Presence. The Commander's eyes were terrible but his voice remained soft. "You know by what a slim thread our invasion plans hang?"

"Yes, Commander."

"You know that utter secrecy has been our key from the start?"

"Yes, Commander."

"I just wanted to make sure before I execute you in the name of the Supreme Otarkian Council."

"Yes, Commander."

The Commander drew his gun and aimed accurately. The guard died bravely.

And that was that.

But there was worry. The Commander consulted with the Second. "It would be wise to return."

The Second calculated time. "It would be high noon back there before we could set down."

"We could wait for darkness."

"True."

"But fifteen hours of daylight would have elapsed."

"It is a lonely place."



"But if a trap were set."

The Second considered. "When the body is discovered — what will it reveal? Nothing definite. No chain of logic could point to us."

The Commander frowned. "But success depends so completely upon secrecy. If the experiment is successful—"

"It will be, sir."

"I hope so. Hold your course for home . . ."

THE BODY of Mack Styles was found at two o'clock that afternoon. By Tom Brazier and Frank Brooks, in a secluded spot on the Arizona desert. After he hadn't reported in they had gone

out in a jeep to check up. They saw Mack's jeep nosing up out of a pocket as though peering at a white alkali flat just beyond.

They rounded the pocket and found Mack and both of them got suddenly sick and strove to hide their shock from each other.

Brazier said, "Jesus!" The word was both a curse and a prayer.

"What could have hit him?"

"Look at his legs. Broken — mangled. Like through a machine!"

"A gorilla could do that."

Brazier forebore the obvious retort and walked out onto the alkali flat. He stopped in its center and turned slowly, his eyes searching. They found nothing. He went to the edge of the flat and began circling it slowly. In four places there were marks in the dust. The marks formed the four corners of a huge square. Something might have set down there but you couldn't be sure. Probably dust-marks left by the swirling wind-devils that danced across the desert like miniature cyclones.

"There's a town over there."

Tom Brazier looked up quickly. Frank Brooks had come to stand by his side and was pointing off through a declivity in the rocks.

"Damned if there isn't. Ever see it before?"

"I think so. Isn't it the same

town that lies about two miles off the Notched Butte road? The direction's about right."

"Uh-huh,"

They were Security men from the camp forty miles southwest; Brazier the senior, gave the orders. As they started back toward the jeep, he said, "Call in and make the report."

"We aren't waiting?"

"No. We'll move on to that town."

"But we looked it over a week ago."

Tom Brazier frowned. "I know, but—"

"But what?"

"There's something funny about that town — something wrong."

"I couldn't see anything wrong with it."

Tom Brazier's eyes were vague. "I had it checked."

This surprised Brooks. "You didn't mention it before."

"No. Nothing to mention, really. Something I can't quite put my finger on."

"Looks like a pretty old settlement."

"It is. It began as a mining town back in 1890. Some silver veins out in the hills. They ran out though and the place became a ghost town shortly afterwards."

"A short life and happy one."

"Short, anyhow. After the sil-

ver piddled out they all left except one or two old sand fleas. Since then it became a stop-over place for casuals."

"But there must be forty or fifty people there now. Where did they come from?"

"Drifted in the last few years I suppose."

"If you have any suspicions, we ought to check. Even if they can't be from outer space."

"I took a spot check," Brazier said grimly. The old coot who runs the hotel came originally from El Paso. A couple of the old uranium hunters rang true on background." There was a pause as they climbed the slope. Then Brazier's frown deepened. "But it isn't the people — they're not what bothers me."

"Then what?"

Brazier's voice was sharp. "I don't know, damn it!"

Brooks was surprised. "All right — all right. Don't bite me about it. I'll send the message . . ."

THEY WERE silent as Brooks turned the jeep and nosed it over the broken country toward the village. Silent, but each occupied with his own grim thoughts; thoughts concerning things the nation had not been told; that the flying saucer joke was no longer that but a very serious matter. Cer-

tain facts had come to light and had been discussed in high-level conference and they added up to good reason for panic: Creatures from outer space *were* hovering over the planet. They were hostile and they wanted to take Earth over.

All the revelations were not catastrophic however if considered comparatively. Fortunately, the aliens, while advanced and of superior intelligence had physical characteristics that set them apart. They could not put down and lose themselves among the planet's population. Also, they did not appear able to overwhelm with superior weapons. Still, they were vicious, crafty, and their coming could mean the end of Terran freedom.

Brooks rolled the jeep past a tilted sign reading, *Mesa Flats—Pop. 21*. The lettering, very old, was almost obliterated.

Another ancient sign hanging over one of the false fronts said, *Elkhorn Hotel*. Brooks pulled up and the two Security men climbed out. Two ancient desert specimens sat in tilted-back chairs on the porch. One of them stirred enough ambition to turn his head. The other went on chewing tobacco and stared out across the desert.

Inside an equally leather-faced oldster presided behind the desk. He said, "Howdy men," and ex-

tended a battered pencil across the register.

Tom Brazier signed. Frank Brooks looked about, trying to find something wrong. Failing in this he tried to conjure up the uneasy feeling that something might be wrong. He failed again. He said, "How long have you been running this place, Pop?"

"Nigh onto ten years now. And the name's Frank Sibley, son. Never did get me a wife so o'course I ain't nobody's pop."

Frank Brooks grinned but as there was no rancor in the oldster's tone he didn't apologize.

"How is the food in the restaurant?" Tom Brazier asked.

"Fair to middlin', *Frijoles* and beans. Ain't nobody can spoil *frijoles* and beans."

"That's what you think," Brooks said.

"Stayin' long?"

"A couple of days, maybe," Brazier told him. "Thought we might scout the hills. If the area looks right we might bring in some small uranium equipment."

"Good luck. Your room's to the head of the stairs — second door on, the right."

"Thanks."

They went out and moved slowly down the street. There were people but they seemed used to strangers. There were desert-worn

women, sun blackened children, leather-faced men.

The two Security men had been silent. Now Frank Brooks spoke suddenly. "If you're thinking about Quislings or traitors, Tom, it just doesn't make sense. These people aren't intelligent enough. An invader would go where—"

"I'm not thinking about that. Let's eat."

They went into the restaurant and were served by a fat woman who waddled back and forth from the kitchen, wedging herself through the doorway each time. The food was acceptable, exactly what could be expected in a place like this.

Outside again, Tom Brazier stopped suddenly in the middle of the hot street.

"What's wrong?" Brooks added.

"Damn it! Damn it all to hell! I don't know! and I should know! I came back here to find out and I still know something's wrong but I can't spot it."

Frank Brooks was concerned. "Tom, are you sure you're not just all tightened up about this whole deal?"

"No, I'm not. Look here—didn't you ever go through a place and remember it later as being — well, not quite right? Something you missed, maybe?"

"I'm afraid I'm not the sensitive type but I get what you mean."

Then again, though, it *might* be an illusion of some kind. You might have the place mixed up subconsciously with another place of this kind you've seen."

"Maybe. Let's take a walk around the whole town — look at it from all angles."

THEY WALKED. They climbed into the jeep and rode the slopes and the *arroyos*. No one paid any attention to them. No one bothered them. They spent the day and returned to town and ate again in the bleak little restaurant. The same woman pushed endlessly through the too-narrow doorway. When they went to their room the lamp cast such an unsatisfactory light that they put it out and went to bed.

This arrangement satisfied Frank Brooks completely. He was bone tired and sound asleep as soon as he hit the bed.

But not for long. He was awakened almost immediately, it seemed, by a prodding hand. He rolled over. "Whazza mat—?"

"I've got it!"

"You got what?"

Tom Brazier did not appear to hear him. Brazier stood tensely beside the bed holding the lighted lamp. His eyes were bright and hard.

"They couldn't have been left

here alone — without some kind of guidance — some means of command. There has to be something. Get your clothes on."

Brooks was out of bed dragging at his pants. "Okay, okay. If you're going nuts, I might as well go with you. But what the hell will we be looking for?"

"I don't know. Some kind of a machine maybe."

They were in the hall moving quietly through the darkness. "Anything like that would probably be in a cellar or basement somewhere wouldn't it?"

"You'd think so. Under the biggest building I imagine."

"That's right here — the hotel."

"Let's look for a door."

They hunted quietly, making the sparest use of the pocket flashes they carried clipped in their breast pockets. But they found no cellar door, no basement entrance, and ascertained, finally, that the building stood on solid ground.

"We'll have to check the other ones," Brazier said.

They found what they were looking for under the restaurant. They broke in through the back door and found a trap behind the counter. Brazier lifted it.

A soft blue glow lit the narrow stairway and they went downward

into a steel-walled room in the center of which stood a shining machine. Though inanimate, the bright metal monster seemed to possess a life force. Electrical impulses chuckled and muttered behind the glowing bulbs and dials that created mysterious profiles on its surface.

"Well I'll be damned!" Frank Brooks muttered. "You figured it was here. We looked for it — and found it! Now what I want to know is — "

"We've got to make a report. Let's just hope we get out of here alive."

Brooks felt no great concern on this score. He was sure they had not been seen. He closed the trap and followed Tom Brazier out the back door. And stopped short.

They were all there — the inhabitants of Mesa Flat — the young, the old, the men and the women. They stood in a quiet semicircle around the rear of the building. There was no indignation upon their faces, no anger in the group, no fury in the desert town. Only a silence that chilled Frank Brooks; quiet, set faces; bodies that began moving slowly forward, tightening the semicircle.

Frank Brooks saw Tom Brazier's hand go under his coat and Brooks still couldn't believe it. *Not shoot them down.*

Brazier fired point blank at the nearest man.

In a seeming daze, Frank Brooks stared. Two slugs, dead center in the chest, but the man came on. Shuddered slightly from the impact. But came on.

Then Brazier was bellowing, "For crissake! Don't stand there! defend yourself!" and Frank Brooks came out of his daze and was also firing — at people who kept coming on until it was all nothing but a nightmare.

Brazier's target was now reaching forth a pair of steady arms, reaching with hands that would grip and kill.

Brazier fired desperately. "They've got to be vulnerable somewhere!" he yelled "Somewhere you wouldn't expect."

He found the spot by chance. A desert rat's hands were upon him when his gun exploded for what would have had to be the last time. The slug went downward. The desert rat stopped, then crumpled slowly to the ground.

"The left thigh," Brazier cried. "That's where the control is. Shoot for their left thighs!"

Brooks stopped the fat woman from the restaurant as her hands tightened on his throat. He shook his head to clear his brain and found Brazier had blasted a path through the solid mass in front.

"Run!" Brazier shouted. "The hell with the jeep! Just run!"

They ran . . .

THEY DISSECTED one of the bodies at the camp; standing around in a silent group; stunned by the complete reality of the thing.

"It even has a kind of blood." The Commanding Officer said. "The analysis will be interesting."

Frank Brooks pointed at the body. "That's not actually flesh? Not skin or bones?"

"Yes, and no," the Commanding officer said. "They're synthetics but possibly as good as our own."

"Putting the control unit in the leg was a master touch," Tom Brazier said.

The Commanding Officer, noting the tight faces about him, laid down his scalpel and said, "This throws a grave light on the situation of course, but it isn't as bad as it seems. In fact, the discovery turns the tide in our favor. Obviously they came down some years ago and did away with the residents of Mesa Flat when there was possibly only a handful of people in the village. These they recreated in the form of androids through a process we are not familiar with and then began adding to the population by feeding in more

androids. Maybe there were more than just a few natives in the beginning because our spot check caught four authentic backgrounds."

"But if they can create human beings —" Frank Brooks said.

"The main thing is they evidently cannot destroy us by frontal assault. Thus this attempt at infiltration. Obviously the project is in its experimental stage. And knowing what to look for, we can take it from here."

The commanding Officer smiled at Frank Brooks and Tom Brazier. "Good work, you two."

"But I had nothing to do with it, sir," Frank Brooks said. "The meeting's adjourned . . .

OUTSIDE, Frank Brooks turned on his partner. "I had no right to any of the credit. Why didn't you let me say it?"

"You said it," Brazier grinned.

"Besides—it was a team job."

"Like hell! I don't even know what tipped you off. You had no reason to jump out of bed in the middle of the night and go hunting for that machine. Or did you?"

"Remember when I said there was something wrong with that town?"

"I remember, but—"

"Figure it out. The original life of the town was only a few months,

so up to that time it had a right to be without one."

"Without one what?"

"But with a continuous population for ten years, it certainly should have had one."

"One *what*, damn it?"

"A graveyard."

Brooks mouth dropped open. "Say—that's right. There wasn't a tombstone anywhere around!"

Tom Brazier was grinning. "So the superintelligent aliens defeated

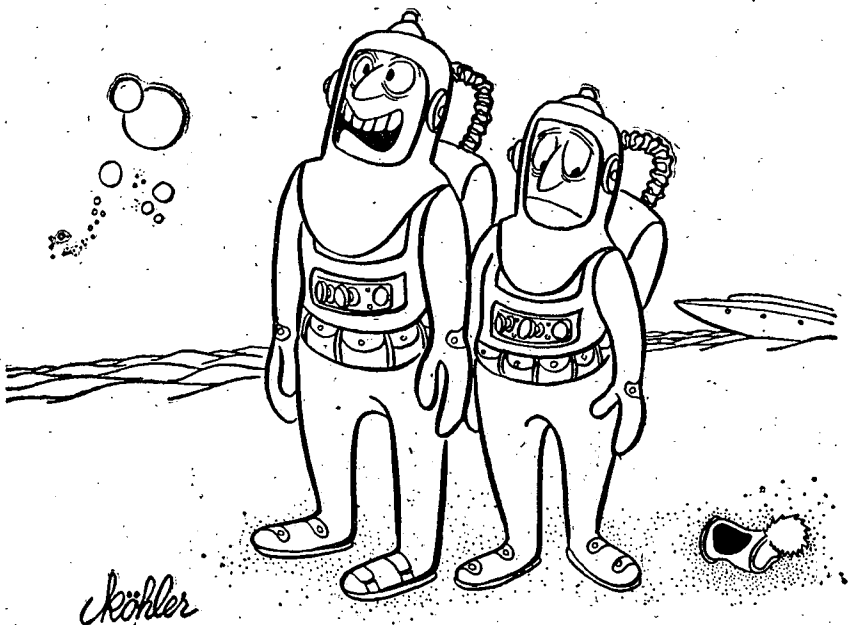
themselves by being too meticulously careful. They destroyed the bodies of the natives they killed and tripped themselves up."

"When all they had to do to really camouflage the layout was to bury them."

"They ought to give you a medal, man!" Frank Brooks said fervently.

"I'll settle for a cup of coffee. Come on."

THE END



"Think of it! We're standing on ground never before trod by the foot of man!"



Solar Power



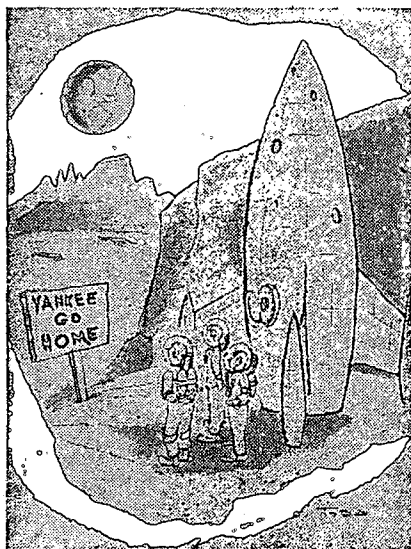
SOLID-state physics, the science concerned with transistors, Germanium diodes, crystal rectifiers, and Solar batteries, is turning up a champion in its latest development.

The Solar battery, which produces an electric current in sunlight, is a big brother to the familiar photo-cells used in photographic light-meters. Where there a minute electrical signal is produced, here in the Solar cell, husky electrical power is available for use.

Already the Solar cell has been put to work supplying power for telephone systems in remote areas. True that's only a tiny step, but a wrist-watch powered by solar en-

ergy exists (keep your sleeve rolled up!) and that's more than a start.

The horsepower hours of energy which fall on each square foot of Earth's surface are tremendous. Solar batteries enable this energy to be tapped. All that remains is that some suitable electrical storage device be invented—and power will become cheaper than water—and mobile. In fact it has been suggested that a Sun-mobile be built, but that awaits the storage device since direct drive would be impracticable—what would you do at night? There's a hint in the air—power soon, from sun, or atomics, will be free . . .



John Gardner made up his mind to buy his wife a very unusual present — one she could not resist. So he asked the salesman to show him —

The Obedient Servant

by

S. M. Jenesshaw

Illustrated by W. E. Terry

THEY QUARRELED at breakfast. This was not strange because they quarreled often. But it bothered him after he'd called for his car and was on the way to his office, he realized she was the only one left.

The realization came suddenly and now he was frightened — this strange man who needed friends as a spider needs flies — in order to survive. His wealth had drawn them of course; a fact he refused to believe. But even unlimited resources could not hold them and insult and abuse drove them all finally away. Yet he continued to insult and abuse while painfully seeing them leave. Because that was the kind of man he was.

Until now they were all gone, the dear ones, the relatives, even the fawners and he realized in panic that only Dolores was left.

But she will stay. There is no cause to worry. She will stay because she loves me because she married me.

But he was nervous. He knew this quarrel had to be patched up because he had too much at stake. And knowing only one way to patch a quarrel, he frowned and pondered. A gift of course, but what? She had everything. Another diamond necklace? Another ruby ring? Somehow he felt neither would do the trick this time. The quarrel had been very bitter.

Then he remembered and smiled and told his chauffeur, "There is a store I noticed in the International Building. Kamiss and Company. Stop off there. . ."

He marched into the richly decorated showroom and said, "I'm John Gardner of Gardner Industries. I understand you've got some-

thing new."

The clerk almost snapped his spine bowing. John Gardner! Mr. Billions himself! If he could get him on the customer list it would be a tremendous prestige boost. "Indeed we have, sir. I imagine you are referring to our new unit — *Domestic Two*?"

"I don't know what you call it, but it's the servant-robot you people have spent millions publicizing. Will it actually do what you claim?"

"Oh, yes. Our advertising was underplayed if anything. You see, Mr. Gardner, robots have been found quite satisfactory for assembling work — manufacturing operations and the like, where they functioned as mere automatons."

"I know," Gardner said coldly. "I use seven hundred of them in small-parts assembly."

"But only now has Kamiss been able to individualize the robot and endow it with a real intelligence. The process involved a new sensitizer we developed. This device is motivated by a micro-wave control individualized to the unit itself. The result, Mr. Gardner is basic intelligence and unswerving devotion. Each unit is—"

"You talk too much," Gardner growled with his usual tact. "Trot one of the things out and let me look it over."



"Certainly sir," and the clerk scurried away, fearful of offending this powerful man.

A FEW MOMENTS later, the drapes parted and a robot walked into the room. Gardner scowled at it. He was disappointed. "Rather tall isn't it?"

The clerk, following close behind the robot, said, "True, but its dimensions are the result of exhaustive scientific research. The height is nine-feet-three and one-quarter inches, the arm-span six-feet-two inches. The body and the appendages are well padded with our new *Vino-Live Plasticene*—almost a flesh-equivalent. The hands you will note, sir, are absolute masterpieces of human ingenuity. The unit can powder a rock or pick up a pin. Let me demonstrate."

"It's about time," Gardner growled.

The demonstration was spectacular. The robot took a one-inch steel bar in its hands and formed a loop. It threaded an old-fashioned sewing needle, then picked up a fragile vase and moved it tenderly across the room.

The clerk beamed with justifiable pride. "Tell the gentleman your qualifications, Raymond."

The robot looked at Gardner through two blue electronic eyes

and said, "I can perform any task a human servant can perform. And I will be more devoted and loyal than a human servant could possibly be. Your commands will be obeyed without question. Your wishes will always be fulfilled to the limit of my power. You and you alone will be my god."

The salesman coughed apologetically. "A little flowery, I'm afraid, but our advertising and sales engineers demanded it."

"Where does the voice come from?"

"Another Kamiss innovaton. An ultrasonic selector draws the words from a storage wire attuned to—"

"Enough chatter. I'll take one."

The salesman beamed. "Where would you like it delivered, sir?"

"I'll take it with me. I plan it as a surprise gift for my wife."

The salesman's smile vanished. "Then perhaps you could bring the lady here to our establishment—"

"No," Gardner scowled. "Why should I?"

"As I was endeavoring to explain, sir, the units are, of necessity, completely individualized. The controlling factor is the electronic wavelength of the owner's brain. As you know, the frequency of every human brain varies. No two are alike. That is the key to the whole concept of *Domestic Two*. We—"

"Will you quit babbling and get

to the point!" Gardner bellowed. "Tell me in simple words why I can't take the robot with me!"

"Because, sir," the clerk answered in a frightened voice, "to be of any value to your wife, the unit will have to be keyed to her brain frequency."

Gardner stomped the floor. "Then you've wasted my time. We can't do business. My wife would never come down here."

"But the adjustment takes only a few minutes—"

"We had a quarrel, you fool! She won't even unlock her bedroom door for me. The whole idea of this thing was something to surprise her out of her anger and bring about a reconciliation."

Gardner was striding toward the door. The clerk was frantic. This sale would have got him Company recognition. In desperation, he hurried after Gardner.

"May I make a suggestion, sir?"

Gardner turned. "All right—make it."

"It occurred to me that you might have the unit attuned to your own frequency—temporarily, that is. You could present it to the lady, then at her leisure, she could call here and have the frequency changed to correspond to her own."

Gardner scowled. "Well, why

didn't you say that in the first place? How long does this adjustment take?"

"Only a few minutes," the clerk said eagerly. "If you will just step this way, sir. Come Raymond . . ."

RAYMOND sat hunched beside the chauffeur who was a trifle nervous. But the chauffeur hid his agitation because John Gardner paid well and had been known to discharge chauffeurs who displeased him and leave them standing on street corners without jobs. Gardner ordered him to turn and go back home. As they rode, Raymond stared straight ahead, a pleasant light glowing in his blue eyes.

When the car stopped under the portico, Gardner said, "Get out and open the door, Raymond."

The robot said, "Yes, master," and obeyed instantly.

The chauffeur, shouldered aside by the robot, looked worried. Gardner noted this and enjoyed adding to the man's discomfort: "Maybe they build one that can drive a car. In that case I won't be needing you much longer."

Inside, the robot gently lifted Gardner's coat from his shoulders, hung it in the closet, then returned to Gardner's side. "Have you any further wishes, Master?"

Aladdin's genie come true, Gardner thought, and amused himself for a few minutes putting the robot through a series of grotesque duties. Amazing! Perhaps he would get one of these units for himself also.

Then he turned his mind to Dolores. She was no doubt still in her room. But this new toy would make her forget their quarrel all right. He visualized her laughing interest. He could already see her clapping her hands like the child she was and rushing into his arms.

Gardner turned to the robot. "Raymond, go up the stairs and knock on the first door to your right. It is your mistress' room. Tell her I'm waiting. Bring her to me."

The robot nodded and Gardner

thought a look of adoration glowed in its eyes. It said, "Yes Master," and moved toward the stairs.

Gardner sat down. He smiled to himself, anticipating the reunion. It wasn't every wife whose husband could go out and buy her a thirty-thousand-dollar toy.

There was the crash of rending wood. The sound chilled Gardner, froze him so that the angry scream that followed was anticlimax. But it brought movement back into his legs and he lunged toward the stairs. He bellowed an order.

Too late. The robot was already descending. It carried the dead body of Dolores in its steel arms. Her head hung limply on a horribly twisted neck.

"She refused to come, Master," the robot said.



Bustle Building



NO SCIENCE is more impenetrable than aerodynamics. This recalcitrant technique which embodies something of art in its domain, has very slowly yielded to the aggressive assaults of scientists. The conception of stream-lined flow in a fluid was long ago known—at least a century, but until the last three or four decades hardly anything else was known about air flow.

The latest steps in aerodynamics, a consequence of the problems encountered in passing through the

sonic "barrier", is a shrinking down of the fuselage of a jet just abaft the nose, and then a flaring out into a sort of bustle. In fact, at first sight, this remarkable alteration of the lines of flow of a jet plane, make the aircraft look disproportioned. But its results are remarkable.

Shrinking the fuselage in the middle removes a tremendous shock-wave-forming surface, relieves this area of that fault and permits the plane to slide through the buffeting of high speed air with but three

quarters of the previously needed power!

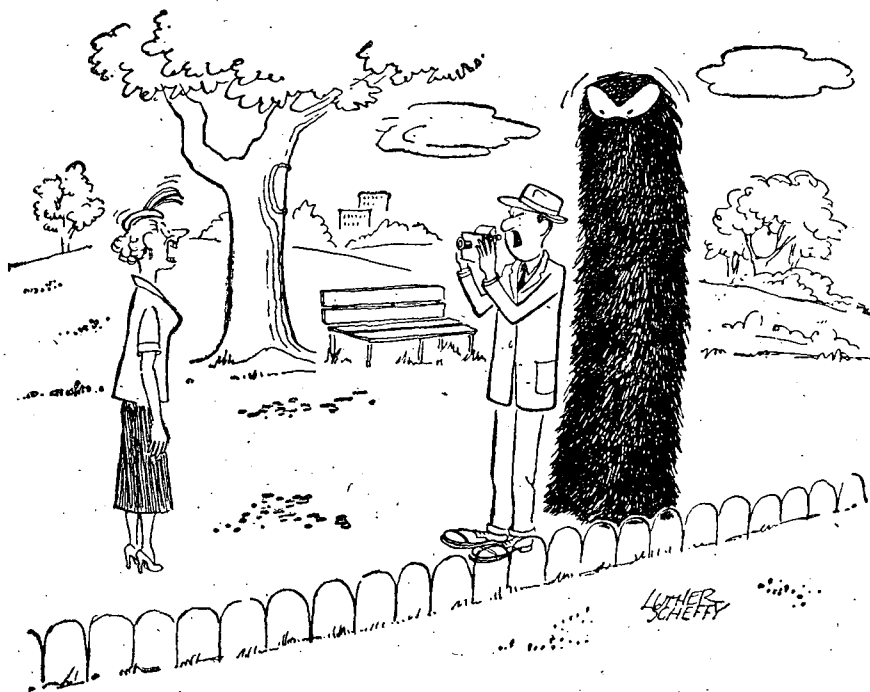
The thrust of the jet goes into useful work to produce speed. It is expected that this comparatively simple change is going to push aircraft speeds to the physical limits of the power plants. And all that's required is a restriction.

Perhaps the most striking thing about this discovery is that it occurred at all. The young American aircraft engineer who found this out has created a minor American revolution, for wind tunnel tests and other theoretical work did

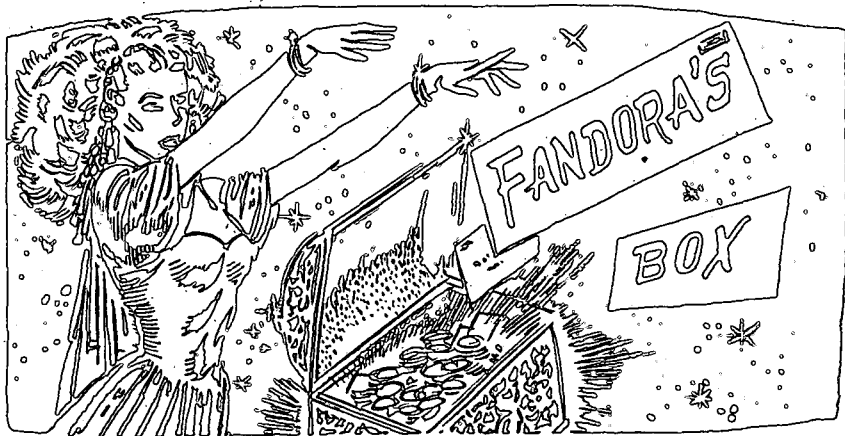
not suggest the idea.

Shock waves form on any point or surface where there is an abrupt discontinuity. The bustle effect rarely suggests a discontinuity. What it actually does, unexpectedly, is to relieve that abruptness so that the air slides by without the shock wave creating itself and turning engine energy into detrimental drag.

Rocketry as a science is not terribly interested in fluid flow except inside its motors. Perhaps this will be a clue to a new rocket motor design . . .



"Try to make that smile a little more natural!"



Conducted by Robert Bloch

TIME: Early 1956.

PLACE: The Bloch residence, Weyauwega, Wisconsin. As the curtain rises, we find BLOCH hard at work in his study. Enter, MARION, his wife.

MARION: Wake up!

BLOCH: Whazzamatter? (He opens his eyes, blinks) How often have I told you never to wake me before bedtime?

MARION: But there are some people here to see you.

BLOCH: Well, tell them to go away—we'll pay them when we can.

MARION: These aren't bill-collectors, stupid.

BLOCH: Then they must have the wrong address. All we ever get around here are bill-collectors.

MARION: This fellow claims he's a Bill Hamling.

BLOCH: Bill Hamling? You mean William Hamling?

MARION: That's right.

BLOCH: William Lawrence Hamling, editor of IMAGINATION?

MARION: Correct.

BLOCH: (Suddenly alert) Well, that's different! Why didn't you say so? Here, help me straighten up this room—get those bats out of here—let's see, now, where are my shoes?

MARION: Your daughter's wearing them.

BLOCH: That's right—it's a school-day, isn't it?

MARION: Well, never mind how you look. After all, the Hamlings must be used to it—they've seen you at Conventions, haven't they?

(Enter, BILE HAMLING and wife FRANCES)

HAMLING: Hi, Bob! Gosh, it's good to see you again!

BLOCH: Mmmfffffmmmm.

HAMLING: Sure great to get up here.

BLOCH: Mmmmmmmuuuugggm.
HAMLING: Stop kissing my feet, will you?
BLOCH: Oh, aren't you an editor any more?
HAMLING: Of course I am. Say, you look pretty good. Doesn't he, Frances?
FRANCES: Yes. But Bob, you've got a mustache!
BLOCH: No. Just that tan shoe-polish your husband uses.
MARION: Why don't you folks sit down?
FRANCES: You mean on those piles of paper?
BLOCH: Those aren't piles of paper—those are manuscripts. Oops—don't sit on that pile! It's full of rejection slips and some of them are pretty sharp.
HAMLING: Well, this looks like a typical author's den to me. And you seem busy enough. Why, look at all that material on your desk—isn't room left for another thing!
MARION: There would be, if he ever took his feet off it.
FRANCES: What are you staring at my husband for?
MARION: Just looking for something, that's all.
FRANCES: I don't understand.
MARION: Neither do I. I don't see any.
FRANCES: Any what?
MARION: Well, Bill is an editor, isn't he? And my husband says that all editors have holes in their head and—
BLOCH: (*Hastily*) Ha ha, just a figure of speech, dear. Why don't you go outside and do a few chores, honey? Time to milk the pigs.

FRANCES: I'll go with you, Marion. Let's leave these two alone to talk business.
(*Exit FRANCES and MARION*)
HAMLING: Well, Bob, how are things going? Sold anything lately?
BLOCH: Sure. My watch, my typewriter and my overcoat.
HAMLING: How about doing a little work for me?
BLOCH: (*Cautiously*) You want your car washed or something?
HAMLING: No. I'm talking about writing. You know the fan column we run in IMAGINATION don't you?
BLOCH: The one called FAN-DORA'S BOX?
HAMLING: That's it. How'd you like to write it for me?
BLOCH: But Mari Wolf writes it.
HAMLING: Not any more. She's leaving. And I thought maybe you could substitute for her.
BLOCH: I've seen Mari Wolf, and believe me: I couldn't even *begin* to substitute for her!
HAMLING: I'm not interested in how you look. What I want is somebody who can take over that feature in the magazine and conduct it. Mari used to review a lot of fanzines, you know. And I understand you get quite a bunch of them.
BLOCH: I'll say I get fanzines! That little place right behind the house is full of them.
HAMLING: Then how about taking over?
BLOCH: You mean I can be an Authority now—like Rog Phillips and Roger de Soto and Willy Ley?
HAMLING: That's right.

BLOCH: Goshwowboyboy! Wait until Tucker hears about this!

HAMLING: Good, that's settled. Hey—look out!

BLOCH: What's the matter?

HAMLING: Duck your head. I think the curtain is about to fall!

THE ABOVE playlet will give you readers a rough—almost brutal—idea of just how it happened that I am now the conductor of FANDORA'S BOX.

Editor Hamling *did* visit me and suggest that I take over, and I accepted with certain stipulations.

First of all, I asked for, and received, *carte blanche* in the writing of these columns. That is to say there will be no set format or policy, except that the material herein will relate to fandom or items of fanish interest.

Fanzines received will be read and commented upon, but not necessarily *reviewed* in set or formal fashion. It has long been my personal belief that it's impossible to review *all* fanzines in a manner that would be fair to *each*. There is no critical standard capable of encompassing the field: evaluating a tyro's first hectographed effort in the same terms as a BNF's offset production is obviously going to lead to invidious comparison. On the other hand, attempting to set up *two* value-systems is equally impractical and unfair.

In my opinion, it would be better to single out for discussion those fanzines, or those individual items in fanzines, which seem of particular interest.

Right now, for example, I'm holding a copy of CANFAN (15c, quarterly; Wm. D. Grant, 11 Bur-

ton Road, Toronto 10, Ont., Canada). Its lineup includes an article by David H. Keller, M. D., entitled *Science - Master or Servant?*, which the good doctor delivered at the Torcon in '48. If you missed it then, it's still timely enough today. Also featured is Gerald A. Steward's *Gaspape*, a fanzine review column, editor Grant's account of the Cleveland Convention rumble, and P. Howard Lyons' scholarly dissertation on Jabberwockania. A second section turns out to be another complete issue of CANFAN, predated February 1956—the Fourteenth Anniversary Issue. Here we find a variety of miscellanea, most significant of which is *The Second Tucker Fan Survey*.

This item, also published in GASP, contains material which should be of interest to every living science-fiction fan and several who have their doubts.

Cleveland Convention attendees had the pleasure of hearing Bob Tucker report on his findings there; now Gerald A. Steward (who distributed 1800 copies of a questionnaire throughout fandom and subsequently tabulated replies) issues a written bulletin on the results.

Here you'll find the statistical norm of fandom: age, sex, occupation, habits, possessions, hobbies, marital status, educational background, religion, likes and dislikes in science-fiction, fan activities and outside interests—plus a summary of attitudes towards fandom and general opinions on such matters as the possibility of space-travel. Definitely a "must" for all fans, old or new. A hearty vote of thanks

is in order to Bob Tucker, who originated the survey, and to Gerald A. Steward, who carried on the tradition in this second polling.

Also at hand, during these first days of the year, is the latest issue of INSIDE (25c, bi-monthly, Ronald Smith, 611 W. 114th St., Apt. 3d-310, New York, 25, N. Y.). This handsomely illustrated and completely legible digest-size fanzine is currently featuring a continuing series of critical articles on the state of science-fiction. In this installment, William L. Freeman surveys the financial situation in the field, Dave Mason discloses the actual *modus operandi* of magazine distribution, and James Blish tilts lances with Sam Moskowitz over the "sense of wonder" in presentday writing. In addition, George W. Price discusses anti-intellectual hysteria. Plenty of material for controversy here, but distinguished by a mature and thoughtful approach. Together with its book reviews and the Tucker news-letter, INSIDE holds much to interest Serious Constructive Fans—i.e., those who can read without moving their lips in the process. Editor Smith deserves congratulations, and support.

From England, land of Blog, snog and fog, comes the current HYPHEN (15c, irregular schedule, Walter Willis, 170 Upper Newtownards Rd., Belfast, N. Ireland). The current issue has been assembled by co-editor Chuck Harris, and contains amusing material by William Temple, John Berry, Jim Harmon, Sadie and Bob Shaw, the American Chuck Harris and others too humorous to mention. Of particu-

lar interest to American fandom is a report on the Cleveland Convention by none other than damon knight. Here the upper-crust writer and lower-case critic reveals himself as a true faaaan at heart: his description of a convention as a "religious event, a love-feast" is both startling and (in my opinion) highly accurate. Knight errant in Cleveland is worth following. The Arthur Thomson cartoons in this issue are particularly fetching: the one on p. 36 is well worth the consideration of those who contemplate fandom as a Way of Life.

From HYPHEN it's only a step to utter madness, or GRUE (½c-per-page-to-the-nearest-nickel, Dean A. Grennell, 402 Maple Avenue, Fond du Lac, Wis.) Here is a fanzine that is legible in every sense of the word, but there's little point in commenting upon it: editor Grennell is reluctantly cutting down the run and attempting to limit rather than increase circulation. Whether or not he can apply a tourniquet remains to be seen—meanwhile, GRUE continues to maintain its reputation for pun-gency, interlineation, and nostalgic studies such as Grennell's masterly analysis of *The Shadow* (which) for the benefit of you youngsters, was once a magazine, instead of something which groundhogs get at 5 o'clock).

There's more Grennell in the 19th issue of OOPSLA (15c, irreg., Gregg Calkins, 2817 Eleventh St., Santa Monica, Cal.) and the closing episode of Walt Willis's account of his American adventures in 1952. Editor Calkins makes the welcome announcement that he

plans to publish the entire series, complete, for 25c—and anyone who has read a portion of this hilarious saga needs no urging to send two bits to Calkins to reserve a copy. Profits from the sale of the volume will be turned over to the Society For the Contribution To the Delinquency of Minors, in Belfast.

PEON (20c, infreq., Charles Lee Riddle, 108 Dunham St. Norwich, Conn.) boasts a line-up of such regulars as Jim Harmon, T. E. Watkins, Dave Mason, Lin Carter and Terry Carr, as well as provocative items by Anglofan Eric Bentcliffe and a discussion of criticism by Robert W. Lowndes. If you're interested in a sidelight on prozine pornography, I refer you to Anglofan Bentcliffe.

From Anglofan to Anglofannies is just a step, as witness FEMIZINE (Pamela Bulmer: American rep., Dick Ellington, 299 Riverside Drive, New York 25). This is a bouquet of the fair flowers of British femme-fandom, and features what is—to this reader—one of the best personalized columns in the field of fandom, by a pseudonymous "Franceska". Presumably "Franceska" is a female, like the rest of the contributors: though my own guess is that she may turn out to be Arthur C. Clarke, as some one else has hazarded. Readers of the next issue may well be privileged to get a continued report of new editress Pamela Bulmer's adventures in the United States. If interested, better contact American representative Ellington for the price of the issue.

There's a "BNF" issue of OB.

LIQUE (15c Clifford Gould, 1559 Cable St., San Diego 7, Calif.) featuring material by Vernon L. McCain, Terry Carr and Bob Tucker; plus a review of Richard Geis's SCIENCE-FICTION REVIEW by five (count 'em) BNFs. The pages are liberally spattered with name-droppings: this is definitely a 'zine for the inner circle and operates on the principle that no neos is good neos. Actually, I'm only kidding: it's just that this time around the entire contents seem to consist of contributions from established fans.

Another Canadian caper is A BAS (25c, Boyd Raeburn, 9 Glenvalley Drive, Toronto 9, Canada) which—in addition to caustic satire, usually devotes a portion of its contents to hot rods and cool sounds. This issue is outstanding for its offtrail ramblings of one Alex (or Rich) Kirs. Mr. Kirs may be regarded in some quarters as a vulgarian, and in others as a screwball with plenty of bounce: I find him to be a drolly original commentator. Incidentally, the A BAS cover is the work of Pat Patterson, who also did the covers for CAN-FAN and INSIDE. Miss Patterson (or Mrs. P. Howard Lyons, as she is called by those wishing to humble her) happens to be no mean slouch as a satirist herself. During the past year or so her artwork has made a marked contribution to the world of fandom. She draws with a scalpel, and her medium is often pure vitriol, but she can convey more meaning in one line than some writers can in a thousand-word editorial.

That seems to wind up the fan-

zine report for this issue. Owing to the editorial shift, there's been a lapse of time since Mari Wolf left and I took over. As a result, while there are plenty of other fan magazines on hand, they're more than a trifle dated. And by the time my comments on them would reach print, the majority would be more than six months old. Hence I've tried to confine my remarks to comparatively recent output only.

However, a new year brings a fresh start. I intend to keep up to date in future installments of this column, and if you'd like comment, send your publications to me, c/o IMAGINATION. As I mentioned previously, there will be no formal reviewing, and no guarantee that every magazine receives notice each time around. However, when items appear that provoke a reaction, the reaction will be forthcoming.

Right now, the outlook for 1956 seems unusually bright. Canadian and British fandom set a fast pace in '55, but the American contingent has recently been strengthened by the addition of several promising neofans, such as Lee Hoffman. And who knows, this year may bring us another issue of DIMENSIONS.

Since we're into the Con Year as I write these closing lines, it's time for me to make a few Resolutions. And Number One on my list is the determination to send \$2 to the 14th World Science Fiction Convention, Box 272, Radio City Station, New York City 19 N. Y.

If you're any kind of a fan at all (and you must be, or else you'd never have gotten this far) then

there's no need for me to shill for the Convention or urge you to send for your Membership Card. The reason I bring the matter to your attention is that I suspect you might be inclined (as I am) to procrastinate.

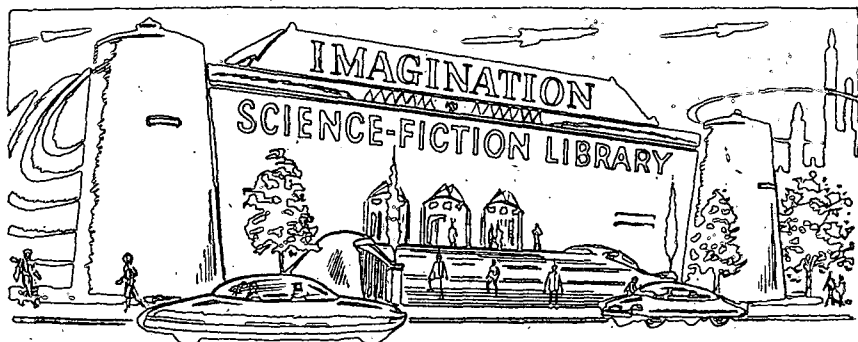
Year after year, when Convention sites are announced, a few of the faithful plunk down their money and get it over with. But usually, when the first and second Progress reports are issued, the Membership Listing seems pitifully small. It isn't until around June or July that the list attains respectable proportions.

Actually, it *pays* to get your money in early. It pays because it enables the Convention Committee to get a better idea of possible or potential attendance—and make plans accordingly. Proper accommodations can be arranged for if estimates are made well in advance; the program can be tailored accordingly. In addition, the Committee has funds to work with from the beginning; and money comes in handy during the early stages.

So don't put it off. Get your money in now. You'll be helping the Convention, the Committee, and yourself to have a bigger and better affair. Don't miss this chance to come and hiss the editors.

And now, farewell until next issue. Incidentally, if any of you have suggestions for discussion in this column, you might drop me a line. Almost anything of a fanish nature, with the exception of private feuds, is grist for the mill. I'll be ready for action when I get your reaction.

—Robert Bloch



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

THE BEST SCIENCE FICTION — 1955

Edited by T. E. Dikty, 544 pages, \$4.50, Frederick Fell, Inc., Publishers, New York, N. Y.

Not the least interesting part of this monumental compendium is Editor Dikty's long introduction, "The Science Fiction Year". A purist might cavil at his mixing science and science-fiction indiscriminately, but in light of the last two decades that wouldn't make a good case.

A bibliography of fiction and non-fiction is appended to this 544 page tome and it too is informative.

Friberg's "Careless Love" is a semi-comic gem almost worth the price of anthology. His spoofing of the ultra-ultra computer story is a marvel of satire. What happens when Dinah, the American computer master-minding a Russo-American War falls in love with her op-

posite counterpart, Mark Stalin XX? First rate!

In a more serious vein is Robert Abernathy's fine piece of work "Heirs Apparent". This is one of those post-War III stories so popular now, but concerned only with a miniscule group of farmers on the Ukrainian plains. They are being led from savagery and despair to civilization and hope by the American Smith; then ex-Commisar Bogomazov, still full of fighting patriotism steps in. Again first-rate.

Generally speaking the anthologizing process has been over-done in recent years. It would seem that having just read a story in a current magazine, a month later you'd find it anthologized. This book is guilty of that practice too—but that's its only flaw.

THE FITTEST

by J. T. McIntosh, 192 pages, \$2.95, Doubleday and Company, Inc. Garden City, New York.

This is a superb example of what a gifted writer can do with a time-worn, familiar plot. From start to finish it is a breather; true the characterization is sometimes thinly drawn, but there is so much action and suspense, that if wooden dummies were going through their paces you'd be just as excited.

The author asks you to imagine a world in which all vertebrates have gotten (the details of the inoculation are unimportant) close to the intelligence of human beings, have acquired thinking capacity coupled with their inherent cunning.

Horses, dogs, cats, rats, and everything else with four legs and a spine works to destroy men and their civilization.

You can't pick out a hoarier plot than that one, but wrap it up in the excitement as McIntosh does, and you have something. For the somewhat jaded appetite of this reviewer—a bit fed up with galactic bombast and social prescience—this straight adventure story was a treat.

An amusing love story threads the novel and while the book doesn't end on a down-beat, neither does it end with sweetness and light, a reasonable conclusion admitting its premise.

THE CASE OF BRIDEY MURPHY

by Morey Bernstein, \$3.75, 257 pages, Doubleday & Company, Inc. New York City, N. Y.

This is a "factual" story, in which the author tells of experiments in hypnosis; a young lady is purported to have been able to place herself in the mind of a Bridey Murphy a hundred and fifty years ago. Under hypnosis the girl tells of the life of this young Irishwoman whose alter ego she is and the tape-recordings are transcribed for the benefit of the reader.

The book includes with a number of appendices on parapsychology, Dr. Rhine's work in ESP, psychokinesis and materials of that sort.

The book is a labor of love, documented, and painstakingly written. The shadow of the adman looms

large though when the jacket announces that recordings of the tapes are available. With no offense intended for the author, I think the book is so much nonsense.

If you, like Edgar Cayce, are interested in "parapsychological" matters mentioned, you will enjoy "The Search for Bridey Murphy."

I cannot grant any of the premises on which the book is based; I question Rhine's work, and I disbelieve in the conclusions as well as the problems herein presented.

Between Velikovsky's pseudoscience, and Flying Saucers—and now this—I wonder what one must do to tax the credulity of publishers and publishing houses.

I suspect that these things must sell very well indeed to account for their being printed at all.

Letters from the Readers

CHEERS FOR THE BEMS!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

After shucking out the usual 35c for *Madge*, I was struck with a strange and exotic desire, which—inexplicable as it seems—had never occurred to me before. In short, I felt 'twould be nice to write you a letter. I've never attempted such shenanigans, since I am a rather reserved and resistive character; yet at times even a mouse like me squeaks up!

This particular squeak concerns *Madge*. Commendations, not condemnations, are in order.

To this particular observer you represent a certain field of science fiction which is being currently overlooked, underrated, and at times sneered upon by the elite: that field being adventure sans scientific documentation.

Ah, for those good old days, indeed, when the Burroughs-type Mars seemed possible, and BEMS were knocked silly by the hero's hard fist just as he was about to catch up with the defenseless fe-

male! To what cause do we owe this desertion of the principles of plagiarized westerns which seems to have occurred in all magazines but yours?

Well, an English prof who lectured to the University S-F Club a couple of weeks ago listed several supposedly valid reasons which I jotted down . . . it being a rather useful habit of mine to take notes at all lectures, even free ones.

1. As more is learned in scientific fields pertinent to s-f, more information is applied by good writers to make their stories seem plausible as well as entertaining . . . they're forced to do so by reader demand, since very few people enjoy actually having to make believe something is so when science says it isn't.

2. Characterization has evolved from stilted, unrealistic, western prototypes to almost literary classification due to the diligence of readers, and consequently of editors, in demanding "good" stories. Writers also have had to mature

as a consequence of this outlook.

Several other reasons were given, but these two are the ones the prof stressed the most. I can't say that I agree with him, unfortunately, on all of his viewpoints—rather glad I'm not taking the course he teaches! Chad Oliver, the club's sponsor, seems to do so wholeheartedly, judging from his published stories . . . Mr. Oliver's forte is anthropology (he's an associate professor in the subject here at U. T.)—so the majority of his stories are based on anthropological themes.

We appreciate your covers very much, also . . . not that they're exactly arty, but that they appeal to a submerged bit of whimsy within us. The other mags feature a bit of scientific foolishness on their covers—I can open the ol' texts and find their equivalent, practically . . . quantitative analysis, scientific writing, and a few lesser subjects have texts with veddy icky illustrations. A poor sex-starved science major gets tired of looking at graphs and charts and the Dali prints above his desk. He likes to see curves other than the log-type, and 35c is cheaper than a Rodin nude print!

Three cheers for the old traditions! Let's have Little Nell rescued by the hero from the villain's clutches on *every* cover! (re Feb. issue.) Let's return once more to those days of yore when a Bem was a BEM, not an extra-terrestrial entity. Here's for hairier, scarier monsters and less foolish scientific babbling. Here's to the fun of *reading* science fiction. Adventure and all its excitement!

Don Bott

2024 Speedway

Austin, Texas

A toast with which we wholeheartedly concur. Matter of fact, we'll drink to it again. And nobody has to break our arm to agree to a third round! And more . . . wth

DOGMA . . . AND STUFF . . .

Dear Ed:

From my experience with meeting people who like science fiction, I would say that, loosely, s-f fans fall into two classifications: the readers who read the stories for enjoyment only, and those who are interested in the "experiments" that could not take place outside science fiction. It is my personal belief that the s-f audience is more intellectually alive than the audience for westerns, for example.

In the February issue of *Madge* there are two stories that try to put across a Horatio Alger type of dogmatic belief in a controversial viewpoint. EVERYBODY IS HAPPY BUT ME seems to me to be an unwanted slam on stimulants (dope). If I wished to read an article on this subject I would buy a copy of one of the scandal mags where I could read a more spicy, but as factual a story as the one you printed.

In the same issue you print MEETING AT THE SUMMIT which is a less subtle, and definitely more obnoxious attempt to sway public opinion in a dogmatic way. This story implies that the incumbent president has "seen the light" and therefore we must keep him in office to save the world. I supposed that the Galactics in the story also recommended that I like

back John Foster Dulles' foreign policy of flirting with war also?

I realize that these are only fictional stories, but I recognize and resent their attempts to influence the reader. I regret that I do not have a subscription to cancel, to indicate to you, that I won't put up with propaganda techniques in my literature.

H. Taylor
34-A Harriet St.
San Francisco, Calif.

If we may say so, H, you've been doing more than a little "reading between the lines". Fact is, the Fred Pohl story was nothing but a bit of spoofing on the power of advertising and public gullibility! It had no axe to grind—and even if it did we'd have to call it a mighty dull bit of cutlery. You're confusing entertainment with education. And in science fiction we think the entertainment always comes first! As to the SUMMIT yarn, boy, you sure didn't read the subhead to the yarn! We knew that somebody might get the wrong idea so we came right out and stated we were presenting the story because of the idea—and not for any political reason. While we definitely are not sponsors of intellectualism in our reading, this particular short story intrigued the hell out of us with its big question: what if? You're off-base in your accusation of our using propaganda techniques for one big reason: it just ain't so wh

BACK IN THE FOLD

Dear Mr Hamling:

Ever since that Ghod-awful July 1955 issue (that's right, I'm kick-

ing it when it's down) I've sworn off reading *Madge*. However, a few days ago I decided to gamble 35c on a new issue—February '56—and see what I came up with.

Turning to the letter section first I read the letters concerning the October '55 issue. I read unrestrained praise. By the end of the section I was genuinely sorry I'd missed the issue. Because of this, and the excellent cover and contents of the February issue you now have me back on the list of steady *Madge* readers.

In closing let me say that—I liked Paul Fairman's novel, SECRET OF THE MARTIANS, and thought Fred Pohl's EVERYBODY'S HAPPY BUT ME was the high-spot of the issue.

Tom Driscoll
3247 Donnybrook Lane
Cincinnati 31, Ohio

What pray tell, was so Ghod-awful about last year's July issue? But aside from this puzzling question, glad you're back, Tom. And never sell Madge short again! . . . wh

WAITS IMPATIENTLY

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I guess I'll get into the fad of congratulating you on your great improvements with, both IMAGINATION and its companion science fiction magazine, IMAGINATIVE TALES. I started reading *Madge* 2 years ago and I haven't missed an issue. I still wait impatiently for the day it hits the newsstand.

In the February issue, SECRET OF THE MARTIANS by Fairman, and TO SERVE THE MASTER by Dick were both tops. The rest of the stories were above your usual

high average. I enjoy the Rognan covers, but let's have more McCauley—he's the best.

Oh yes, I would like to comment on Dan Galouye's *THE DAY THE SUN DIED* in the December issue. As a sequel it was as fine a story as *TONIGHT THE SKY WILL FALL* in the May '52 issue.

Keep printing excellent lead novels and you'll have one satisfied reader in me!

Dan Lesco
5543 Clement Dr.

Maple Heights, Ohio

Mac will have another cover coming up soon. And we've got some terrific lead novels on tap! . . . wlh

OLD AGE SETTING IN!

Dear Mr. Hamling:

As Robert Frost once replied when asked about fandom: "It goes on!" It is with a wistful sigh that I realize I am one with antiquity. My divinely humorous letters are, upon rereading, merely rather silly. My anti-fanclubs are disbanded.

There is a villain about. I cannot touch him. Time flutters through my clutching fingers. What mattered to a high school sophomore lacks meaning and importance at nineteen. However hard one resists, time, if but by passing, shoves him a few paces toward maturity.

I was once a science fiction fan. I enjoyed it. I also once climbed nightly into bed with my stuffed rabbit. We would have long conversations, and then fall asleep embracing one another. And I enjoyed that. Each age has its particular joy, and my joy—my pride

—my very life through much of high school was science fiction.

They were good years. Perhaps I allowed myself to be carried too far from reality, for that is the basis of fandom, but if my mind was always in an enchanted place, my memories are golden.

I fear this grows gushy. I just wanted to say that fandom, as a teenage activity, if less impressive to these persistently existent females than football, is at least more productive than rumbling.

When my first letter was printed in *Madge*, in those yore days, I received fifty-four replies. If one of you fifty-four is still around, drop me a card!

And you, Mr. Hamling, a hearty on the continued excellence of *Madge*, a lusty lusty on your allowing *Playboy* to reprint from you, and I'll subscribe to both of your magazines when you start featuring *Spacemates*!

John Courtois
318 E. Commercial St.
Appleton, Wisc.

Nineteen . . . man, you really have gone over the hill! Nothing left but that chair on the porch and mulling through one's musty memoirs. But such is Time; it passes, and all things grow jaded—like that first trip to the Moon—still to come, telepathy, telekinesis, Time travel itself, and—but what the heck, those were the days of yore—what we want now is Space-mates! Hmmm. At our doddering age of 35 we still enjoy looking at the stars with a wondering and possessive gleam in our eye. And while our approach to antiquity has not as dulled our appreciative gleam for the femme fatale, we

must admit if given the choice—which one day a man will—of settling happily in that cottage with beauty feminine or striking out for worlds unvisited, in our case we'd choose the latter.—Taking the winsome Spacemate along, of course! Away with the nostalgia, son, great times ahead! wh

THEOLOGICAL PLOTS . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

I read almost every science fiction magazine on the market, and I have noticed the absence of one thing in every one. The only story I have read in recent years that mentioned God in any way other than profanity was in a recent **FANTASTIC**.

It would appear that either the writers or editors are confirmed atheists!

It seems to me that stories could develop a lot of action and suspense and occasionally carry a theological theme.

As far as *Madge* and *Tales* go, they get my vote as tops.

Chris Olson

2019 W. Mistletoe

San Antonio 1, Texas

Apparently you missed one of the great short science fiction stories with a theological theme, Chris. We're speaking of **PATROL** by Dick Nelson in the October 1952 issue of *Madge*. (You can order a copy with the back issue coupon on page 129.) This yarn is one of the finest we've ever read and we recommend it highly. Main reason theological plots are not used too frequently is the tendency to border on fantasy, rather than strictly

science fiction. Atheism does not enter into it at all. Matter of fact most of the writers and editors we know are God fearing people!
 wh

GOOD SCIENCE FICTION!

Dear Bill:

Picked up the February issue today and found it to be up to the high standards you have been setting of late. *Madge* sports a particularly good cover once again, with Lloyd Rognan outdoing himself.

As to the stories, there is not a single bad one in the lot, which is something of a record for any magazine! Your novels have always been good, but Paul Fairman's **SECRET OF THE MARTIANS** is one I dare anyone to make derogatory remarks about. Fairman has the amazing gift of wedging in characterization and description while causing no break in the plot. Surprisingly enough few sf writers are adept at this. And Fairman writes a great adventure story to boot!

As long as we're rating stories, I'll give second place to Philip Dick for **TO SERVE THE MASTER**. Another brilliant short story by one of today's best young writers.

MEETING AT THE SUMMIT is timely with its "coincidental" references to President Eisenhower and Press Secretary James Hagerty. It is not fitting with an action policy, but cannot be denied as a great story.

Milton Lesser's **THE COSMIC SNARE** is an excellent tale of

erie space adventure. Only the stiff competition of the rest of the issue keeps this one from rating at top. I can still recall that grey sub-space as vividly as when I first read the story. That, Mr. Editor, is the sign of darn good writing!

Darius John Granger ("STOP, YOU'RE KILLING ME!") is another up-and-coming young craftsman. I wait impatiently for his first novel, sincerely hoping it finds a place with you.

Topped off by a fine group of reader departments, *Madge* for February makes me shake my head in wonder at these so-called "avid s-f fans" who look down their collective noses at space adventure. All I can say is they are missing

a lot of good science fiction!

Kenn Curtis
4722 Peabody Ave
Cincinnati 27, Ohio

You'll be pleased to know that Darius John Granger's first novel is already on the newsstands—in the May issue of our companion magazine, IMAGINATIVE TALES. If you haven't already got your copy, rush out! We know you'll enjoy his GATEWAY TO INFINITY. The issue sports another excellent cover by Rognan! . . . Which about winds up shop for this issue. How about turning the page and sending in your subscription—you'll note the terrific new free book bonus. We'd sure enjoy adding you to our inner circle of subscribers. Come on, join the gang! . . . wlt

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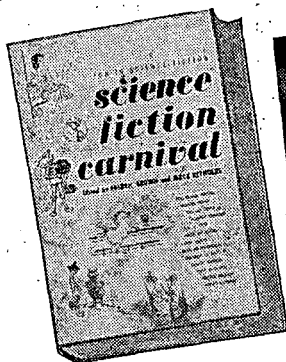
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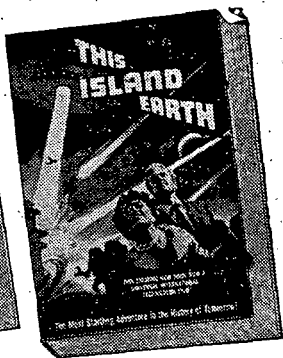
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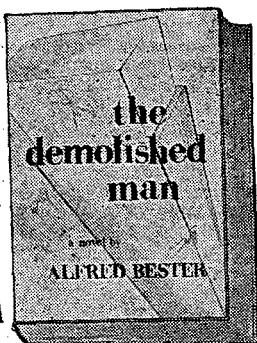
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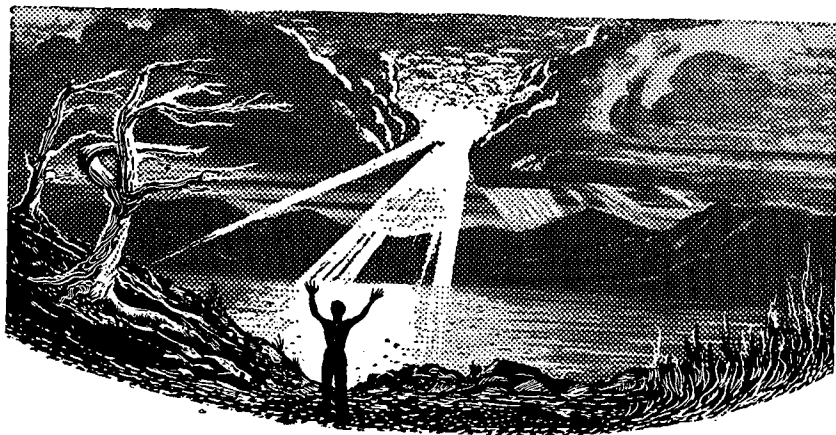
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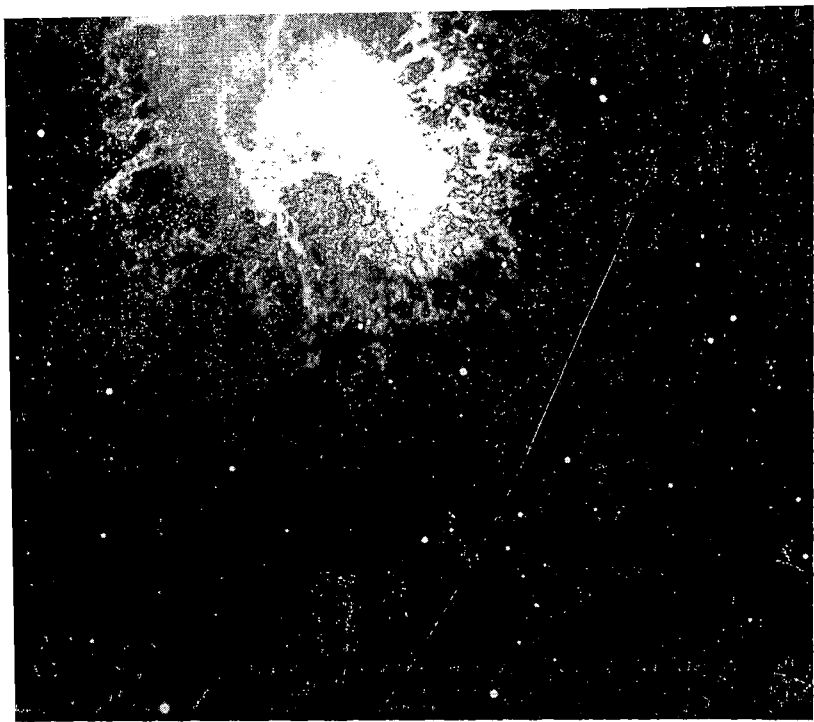
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